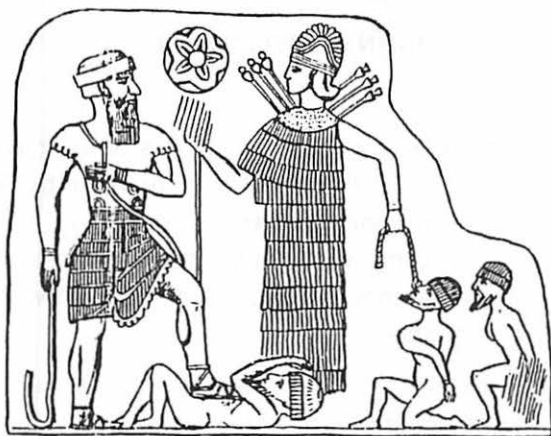


# The Many Faces of Venus:

The Planet Venus in Ancient Myth and Religion

by Ev Cochrane



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# Preface

The present book is the first in a series of volumes exploring the role of the planet Venus in ancient myth and religion. Our ultimate goal is to offer a comparative analysis of Venus-lore and determine whether a consistent and meaningful pattern can be reconstructed from the many seemingly contradictory and incongruous descriptions of the planet. If such a pattern can be demonstrated, important questions arise as to its origin and ultimate significance.

It should be stated at the outset that *The Many Faces of Venus* is very much a work in progress and more a series of vignettes or snapshots than a full-fledged documentary. This is a direct result of the vastness and complexity of the subject matter. Each of the included chapters, if fully elaborated and properly illustrated, could easily fill a volume on its own. In order to pursue and properly analyze all of the intriguing leads uncovered during the course of this research, dozens of additional chapters would have been necessary. Yet it was necessary to draw the line somewhere, for better or for worse. Rather than delay publication further, the decision was made to forge ahead and give readers a sense of the compelling controversy at hand.

**Preface**

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"If we look at the physical universe the way astronomers do, we may never know anything about it. The recent U.S. planetary probes revealed a shocking paucity of real knowledge about the contents of the cosmos."<sup>1</sup>

The slow and steady movement of the respective planets about the sun is frequently lauded as a sign of the clock-like regularity and order which distinguishes the solar system. Yet it can be shown that this much vaunted regularity is a comparatively recent development. As we will document in the pages to follow, the ancient sky-watchers describe a radically different solar system. If we are to believe their explicit testimony, recorded in countless sacred traditions from every corner of the globe, Venus only recently moved on a much different orbit, cavorting with Mars and raining fire from heaven. Is it possible that modern astronomers, in neglecting the ancient folklore surrounding the respective planets, have overlooked a vital clue to the recent history of the solar system? I, for one, believe this to be the case.

From time immemorial the planet Venus has fascinated terrestrial skywatchers, and cultures everywhere assigned it a prominent role in their mythological traditions and religious rituals. Already at the dawn of recorded history, Sumerian priests composed hymns in honor of the planet which they venerated as the goddess Inanna:

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1. G. Verschuur, "Revising the Truth," *Science Digest* (August, 1981), p. 29.

"To her who appears in the sky, to her who appears in the sky, I want to address my greeting, to the hierodule who appears in the sky, I want to address my greeting, to the great queen of heaven, Inanna, I want to address my greeting, to her who fills the sky with her pure blaze, to the luminous one, to Inanna, as bright as the sun, to the great queen of heaven."<sup>2</sup>

As our earliest historical testimony regarding Venus, the Sumerian literature surrounding Inanna is indispensable for reconstructing the ancient conceptions surrounding our Sister planet. Especially intriguing are those hymns which describe the planet-goddess as dominating the skies and raining fire and destruction. The following passage is typical in this regard:

"You make the heavens tremble and the earth quake. Great Priestess, who can soothe your troubled heart? You flash like lightning over the highlands; you throw your firebrands across the earth. Your deafening command...splits apart great mountains."<sup>3</sup>

Such imagery is exceedingly difficult to reconcile with Venus' current appearance and behavior. Indeed, scholars investigating the literature surrounding Inanna/Venus rarely make an attempt to interpret it by reference to celestial phenomena, preferring instead to interpret the vivid catastrophic imagery as the product of poetic metaphor and creative imagination. As we will document, however, the Sumerian testimony has striking parallels around the globe, in the New World as well as the Old, a telling clue that common experience of catastrophic events—not poetic metaphor—is responsible for the peculiar traditions surrounding Venus.

The planet Venus as disaster-bringer is equally apparent in Mesoamerica, where the observation and veneration of Venus amounted to a collective obsession. For the Aztecs and Maya alike, the heliacal rise of Venus was an occasion of ominous portents marked by dread and hysteria. Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar writing in the 16th century, chronicled the Aztecs' perception of Venus:

"And when it [Venus] newly emerged, much fear came over them; all were frightened. Everywhere the outlets and openings of [houses] were closed up. It was said

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2. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 105, quoting the sacred marriage hymn of Iddin-Dagan, circa 1600 BCE. Translation by Birgit Liesching.

3. D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York, 1983), p. 95.

that perchance [the light] might bring a cause of sickness, something evil when it came to emerge."<sup>4</sup>

In the attempt to propitiate Venus, the Aztecs offered it human sacrifices, a practice associated with the planet in the Old World as well.

What is there about the planet Venus that could have inspired such grim rites? Venus' present appearance would never inspire mass hysteria or vivid tales of impending doom and world destruction. How, then, are we to account for the fact that Sahagún's testimony documenting the Aztec's attitude towards Venus echoes the Sumerian skywatchers' conception of Inanna/Venus: "To provoke shivers of fright, panic, trembling, and terror before the halo of your fearsome splendor, that is in your nature, oh Inanna!"<sup>5</sup>

In this book we will seek to discover the historical circumstances and logical rationale behind the ancient mythology attached to Venus. To anticipate our conclusion: Venus was associated with dire portents and tales of apocalyptic disaster for the simplest of reasons—it was a primary player in spectacular cataclysms involving the Earth in relatively recent times, well within the memory of ancient man.

The implications of this theory, if true, are at once revolutionary and far-reaching. In addition to necessitating a drastic revision in our understanding of the historical determinants of ancient myth and religion, the central tenets of modern astronomy and a host of allied sciences would be called into question as well. With stakes this high, it is imperative that we endeavor to gain further insight into the origins of ancient Venus lore.

The ancients' obsession with the planet Venus stands in marked contrast to the relative indifference currently accorded our nearest planetary neighbor. Who among us could even point out the Evening Star on any given night? Would anyone in their right mind be inclined to view Venus as an agent of destruction and impending doom?

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4. B. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex. General History of the Things of New Spain* (Santa Fe, 1950-1970), Book 7, Chapter 3.

5. F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 118, with reference to A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", *ZA* 65 (1976), line 161.

David Grinspoon, a NASA astronomer and the author of a very entertaining history of Venus observation, offered the following summary of the ancients' preoccupation with Venus:

"Venus must always have seemed a unique, animated entity. For our ancestors the details of the complex movements of Venus served as important harbingers of war and peace, feast and famine, pestilence and health. They learned to watch every nuance for the clues they could wrest of what nature had in store. They watched carefully, obsessively, through skies not yet dimmed by industrial haze and city lights, and they learned to predict accurately, for years and decades to come, the rising, setting, dimming, brightening, and looping of Venus."<sup>6</sup>

Confronted with Venus' prominent role in ancient consciousness, Grinspoon, like countless others before him, seems to take it for granted that it is only natural that the ancients would look to that particular planet for omens of things to come. But why should this be, since there is neither an inherent nor logical relation between Venus and the phenomena mentioned by him—war, pestilence, fertility, etc.? Indeed, it stands to reason that any ancient skywatcher worth his salt would soon discover that there was precious little to be learned about such terrestrial matters from the patient observation of Venus. That is, of course, if we are to believe the conventional version of Venus' history, which holds that the planet's appearance and behavior has hardly changed for millions of years.

In recent years, modern astronomy has made great strides in removing the veil which had previously obscured the physiognomy of Venus. For the first several centuries of telescope observation it was commonly believed that Earth's so-called twin was home to beings like ourselves, complete with a thriving civilization.<sup>7</sup> Until the midpoint of the present century it was still thought possible that Venus might be "Earth-like" in its features, with a tropical climate, vast oceans and swamps teeming with various forms of life.<sup>8</sup> Yet all such geocentric scenarios were to receive a severe jolt in 1962 when, courtesy of Mariner 2, Venus was revealed to be a most inhospitable place, with surface temperatures in excess of 900 degrees Fahrenheit. Under such conditions, oceans (of water, that is) are quite out of the question and life, as we know it, almost unthinkable.

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6. D. Grinspoon, *Venus Revealed* (New York, 1997), p. 17.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-39.

8. Of Ray Bradbury's story "The Long Rain," which describes Venus as an "Earthlike, rain-soaked, heavily vegetated jungle world," Grinspoon, *op. cit.*, p. 31 says that it was "consistent with common scientific beliefs of the day"—i.e., 1951.

The recent history of the scientific investigation of Venus reveals a vast theoretical graveyard of discarded hypotheses, false deductions, erroneous premises, shoddy observations, and wishful thinking.<sup>9</sup> While many astronomers, Carl Sagan among them, expected the Venusian clouds to be composed of water, Mariner 9 found precious little water and plenty of concentrated sulfuric acid. Where leading astronomers "observed" luxuriant Venusian vegetation in full bloom,<sup>10</sup> modern space probes discovered a barren, desiccated wasteland. Indeed, if the truth be known, the Mariner, Magellan, and Pioneer missions have forced astronomers to radically revise their previous assessments as to Venus' origin, nature, and geological history. On virtually every major feature of the Venusian landscape and atmosphere, the astronomers' theoretical expectations have been proven wrong time and again. And wildly wrong at that. Given this dismal track record, there would appear to be some justification for maintaining a healthy skepticism with respect to astronomers' current "best guesses" as to what is possible regarding Venus' recent history. Indeed, as we will document, there are good reasons for believing that other—even more radical—revisions in our understanding of Venus are in order.

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9. For a survey, see D. Grinspoon, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-45.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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"One thing is certain, the idea that planets can change their orbits dramatically is here to stay."<sup>1</sup>

A survey of Venus-lore reveals a diverse set of intriguing and endlessly recurring themes: the planet as female or goddess; the planet as agent of war, death, and destruction; the planet as witch-like hag; the planet as "eye" of heaven; the planet as paramour of Mars; and numerous others to be discussed in this and future volumes. A systematic analysis of these various mythological themes, in turn, allows for the reconstruction of an archetypal Venus myth which, in a very real sense, represents mankind's collective memory of our neighbor's tumultuous recent history.

While many of our claims with respect to the ancient conceptions surrounding Venus will sound fantastic when enumerated in advance of proper documentation, the planet's consistent association with the female sex is commonly acknowledged and readily demonstrable. Thus, in his recent book on Venus, Peter Cattermole noted that "a female association is almost universal."<sup>2</sup> And so it is, despite occasional statements to the contrary.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dr. Renu Malhotra of the Lunar and Planetary Institute of Houston as quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph* (October 10, 1999), p. 19.

2. P. Cattermole, *Venus: The Geological Story* (Baltimore, 1994), p. 1.

Among the Arabic peoples of Northern Syria and the Mesopotamian desert, Venus was known as al-'Uzza and envisaged as a powerful female warrior.<sup>4</sup> This planetary goddess is well-attested in ancient sources: "In sources from the fifth century AD she is identified with Aphrodite by an anonymous Syrian historian; with Kawkabta, 'the female star;' with Balthei, by Isaac of Antioch; and finally with Lucifer, the morning star, by Jerome."<sup>5</sup>

The Hebrews knew Venus as Kôkebet, a name which translates as "she-star."<sup>6</sup> This name finds a cognate in the Syrian name for Venus: Kawkabta.

In ancient Persia, Venus was identified with the voluptuous goddess Anahita, the latter being viewed as a warrior and agent of fertility.<sup>7</sup> A vestige of these ancient traditions is preserved in the *Koran*, one verse describing the transfiguration of a young woman into the beautiful star Zohra, an Arabic name for Venus.<sup>8</sup> Yet variant traditions name this young woman Anahid.<sup>9</sup>

In Africa as well Venus was commonly thought of as female. Among the Rotse, for example, Venus was regarded as the wife of the first man.<sup>10</sup> Analogous ideas pre-

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3. Following the lead of Anthony Aveni, Grinspoon, *op. cit.*, p. 24, writes that: "It is simply not true that a female association is general." In support of this statement, Grinspoon points to Quetzalcoatl and Tlahuizcalpanteuctli as classic male Venus deities. Here it can be shown that most of the male deities which various scholars have hitherto identified with Venus are actually Martian in origin. See the discussion in E. Cochrane, "Mars Gods of the New World," *Aeon* 4:1 (1995), pp. 47-63.
  4. M. Höfner, "al-'Uzza," in H. Haussig ed., *Götter und Mythen im Vorderen Orient* (Stuttgart 1976), p. 475.
  5. W. Heimpel, "A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities," *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4:3 (1982), p. 19.
  6. R. Stieglitz, "The Hebrew Names of the Seven Planets," *JNES* 40:2 (1981), pp. 135-136. See also L. Bobrova & A. Militarev, "From Mesopotamia to Greece: On the Origin of Semitic and Greek Star Names," in H. Galter ed., *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), p. 315.
  7. See *Yast* 5.85 for Anahita's astral aspect. See also W. Eilers, *Sinn und Herkunft der Planetennamen* (München, 1976), p. 55; A. Camoy, "Iranian Mythology," in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston, 1917), pp. 279-280.
  8. *Koran* 2.96. See also W. Eilers, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
  9. J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 104.
  10. P. Breutz, "Sotho-Tswana Celestial Concepts," in *Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honour of N. J. van Warmelo* (Pretoria, 1969), p. 206.



vailed among the Karanga, where Venus was known as Nehanda and accorded the strange ability to transform herself into a serpent.<sup>11</sup>

Numerous peoples in the New World also viewed Venus as a female star. The Iroquois of New York knew Venus as "Star Woman" and held that the sun lit his fire by means of her brilliant torch.<sup>12</sup> A similar conception prevailed among the Chilcotin of British Columbia: they viewed Venus as an old woman holding a torch.<sup>13</sup> The Eastern Pomo Indians of California called Venus *Xa'a da*, "Day Woman."<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the Pomo held that Venus served as a guide to the departing soul as it made its way to the celestial hereafter.<sup>15</sup>

Venus was accorded a feminine nature by various peoples of Central and South America as well. Among the Zinacanteco Indians of Mesoamerica, Venus was envisaged as a girl sweeping the path of the sun.<sup>16</sup> The Chamacoco of Paraguay perceived in the planet a beautiful woman named Johle.<sup>17</sup> The Warraus tribe of the Pomeroon knew Venus as Okona-kura. Of this goddess they told the following story: "She it was who stuck in the hole when her people first came down from above the skies to populate the earth."<sup>18</sup>

The Inca knew Venus as a lovely woman by the name of Chasca, renowned for her long-flowing hair. An anonymous Jesuit of the seventeenth century described the planet-goddess as especially devoted to women and princesses:

"[Of Venus] they said that she was a goddess of young maidens and princesses, and originator of the flowers of the fields, and mistress of dawn and twilight; and it was

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11. H. von Sicard, "Karanga Stars," *NADA* 19 (1943), p. 48.

12. D. Miller, *Stars of the First People* (Boulder, 1997), p. 52.

13. L. Farand, "Traditions of the Chilcotin Indians," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* 4 (1900), p. 31.

14. D. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See E. Vogt, *Zinacantan* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 316-318. See also the tale quoted by J. Sosa, "Maya Concepts of Astronomical Order," in G. Gossen ed., *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community* (Albany, 1986), p. 189.

17. J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), p. 94.

18. W. Roth, "An Inquiry into the Animism and Folklore of Guiana Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology* 30 (1915), p. 260.

she who threw dew onto the earth when she shook her hair, and they thus called her Chasca.”<sup>19</sup>

The ancient Balts knew Venus as Aušrine, represented as a maiden of stunning beauty. She was famous for her long hair and deemed responsible for preserving the sun’s fire.<sup>20</sup>

The Yakuts, an aboriginal people in Siberia, knew the planet by the name Solbon, envisaged as a beautiful girl.<sup>21</sup> A legend first recorded in the last century assigns the planet an ominous aspect:

“She is the bride and sweetheart of Satan’s son—ürgel... When these two stars come close to one another, it is a bad omen; their eager quivering, their discontinuous panting cause great disasters: storms, blizzards, gales. When they unite, fathom-deep snow will fall even in the summer, and all living beings, animals and trees will perish...”<sup>22</sup>

A related Yakut tradition makes the disaster-bringing star the daughter of the Devil:

“It is said to be ‘the daughter of the Devil and to have had a tail in the early days.’ If it approaches the earth, it means destruction, storm, and frost, even in the summer; ‘Saint Leontius, however, blessed her and thus her tail disappeared.’”<sup>23</sup>

Viewed in isolation, such traditions can only seem the stuff of fiction. Yet, when viewed with a critical eye in the light of comparable traditions from around the globe, the suspicion arises that something more than pure fantasy is at work here.

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19. *De las costumbres antiguas de los naturales del Piru* (Madrid, 1879), as translated by Jan Sammer, “The Cosmology of Tawantinsuyu,” *Kronos* 9:2 (1984), p. 25. See also B. C. Brundage, *Empire of the Inca* (Norman, 1963), p. 50.

20. V. Straizys & L. Klimka, “Cosmology of the Ancient Balts,” *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 28 (1997), p. 73.

21. L. Mándoki, “Two Asiatic Sidereal Names,” in V. Dioszegi ed., *Popular Beliefs and Folklore Traditions in Siberia* (Bloomington, 1968), p. 489. See also U. Holmberg, “Finno-Ugric and Siberian Mythology,” in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston, 1927), p. 431.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 489.

23. *Ibid.*

The malevolent nature accorded the Cytherean planet will prove to be a recurring theme throughout the course of this book. Among the Samoan Islanders, for example, it was said that Venus (Tapuitema) was a primeval Fijian queen who, upon becoming wild, sprouted horns from her head and engaged in cannibalistic practices.<sup>24</sup> Shortly thereafter the queen was translated to the heavens where, as Venus, she continues to portend the death of kings and nobles.

Among the Kédang of Indonesia, Venus was known as Peni Uno and represented as a woman.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, she was said to be the wife of the male "Morning Star."

The aboriginal peoples native to Australia are renowned for their interest in the stars, the various planets playing a conspicuous role in their sacred traditions, rituals, and artwork.<sup>26</sup> There, too, the planet Venus appears to have been viewed as feminine in nature:

"The Morning Star was also an important sign to the Aborigines who arose at early dawn to begin their hunting. It, too, was personified and frequently associated with death. Arnhem Land legends identify the home of the morning star, Barnumbir, as Bralgu, the Island of the Dead. Barnumbir was so afraid of drowning that she could be persuaded to light her friends across the sea at night only if she were held on a long string by two old women, who at dawn would pull her back to shore and keep her during the day in a basket. In Arnhem Land, because of this connection, the morning star ceremony is an important part of the ritual for the Dead. Barnumbir is represented by a totem stick to the top of which is bound a cluster of white feathers or down, denoting the star, and long strings ending in smaller bunches of feathers to suggest the rays. When a person dies, his/her spirit is believed to be conducted by the star to Bralgu, its last resting place."<sup>27</sup>

The intimate connection of Venus with the celestial hereafter in general and the transport of souls in particular, apparent here and in the aforementioned Pomo tradition, is archetypal in nature and attested around the world.<sup>28</sup>

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24. R. Williamson, *Religious Beliefs and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1933), p. 128.

25. R. Barnes, *Kédang* (Oxford, 1974), p. 122.

26. H. Cairns, "Aboriginal sky-mapping," in C. Ruggles ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the 1990's* (Loughborough, 1993), p. 136.

27. R. Haynes, "Aboriginal Astronomy," *Aust. J. Astr.* 4:3 (1992), p. 134.

A widespread conception viewed the planet Venus as the daughter of the ancient sun-god. The following account, from the Tsimshian Indians of North America, offers a representative example of this theme:

"The sky is a beautiful open country. It is reached through the hole in the sky, which opens and closes...The sky may also be reached by means of a ladder which extends from the mountains to the sky...After reaching the sky, the visitor finds himself on a trail which leads to the house of the Sun chief. In this house the Sun lives with his daughter...The Sun's daughter is the Evening Star."<sup>29</sup>

The Desana Indians of the Amazonian rain forest also referred to Venus as "Daughter of the Sun."<sup>30</sup> According to this tribe, Venus suffered incestuous advances at the hands of her father. Strangely enough, however, it is reported that she continued to live with him as his wife.

Among various Slavic peoples, Venus was known by the name of Danica, "day-star."<sup>31</sup> This same planet-goddess was elsewhere recalled as the sister of the sun or as a great king's daughter.<sup>32</sup>

Having now documented the prevalence of the Venus-as-female theme, how are we to explain it? The astronomer Patrick Moore offered the following suggestion: "A female association is in fact general, except in India; this is natural enough, since to the unaided eye Venus is the loveliest of the planets."<sup>33</sup> Here's a male chauvinist answer if ever there was one. Why should a beautiful planet be viewed as female rather than male?

Others have sought to explain Venus' traditional femininity by reference to the commensuration between the planet's periods of visibility and human gestation. This was the view favored by the astronomer David Grinspoon:

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28. A. Aveni, *Conversing With the Planets* (New York, 1992), pp. 49ff. E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991), pp. 197ff.

29. F. Boas, "Tsimshian Mythology," *ARBAE* 31 (1916), pp. 453-454.

30. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 28-29, 71.

31. William Gibbon, *Popular Star Names Among the Slavic Speaking Peoples*, a Ph.D. dissertation presented to Penn University in 1960, pp. 170-174.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

33. D. Grinspoon, *op. cit.*, p. 24, quoting Moore's *The Planet Venus* (1959).

"Another reason to worship Venus and find significance in her movements is that there are numerous connections between the timing of aspects of her motions and timescales of natural interest to humans. Perhaps most strikingly, the approximate 260-day length of a Venus appearance in the morning or evening coincides closely with the average length of the human gestation period...A knowledge of the close coincidence between the cycles of Venus and human pregnancy may have contributed to the persistent, but nonexclusive, Western attribution of female characteristics to Venus."<sup>34</sup>

This explanation, while more logically consistent than that of Moore, can hardly be given credence, for it implies that primitive cultures around the world were aware of the 260-day appearance interval of Venus and noticed its near-synchronism with the human gestation period. There is little evidence for this claim and much against it. While the 260-day period of Venus was certainly known to the Maya and likely known to the ancient Babylonians of the first millennium BCE, it can hardly be believed that the same was true of the Australian Aborigines or the Siberian Yakuts, both of whom regarded Venus as a female.

The logical problems apparent in the explanations offered by Moore and Grinspoon underscore the fact that it is very difficult to discern anything in the present appearance of the Cytherean planet which would justify its traditional femininity. Why was Venus deemed the female planet *par excellence*, rather than Mercury or Jupiter? Before we attempt an explanation of this theme (in chapter eight), it is necessary to briefly review the cult of the Sumerian Inanna, where Venus' feminine gender is prominent.

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34. *Ibid.*, p. 18. A similar explanation was offered by E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991), p. 18

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"Basic to all religion—and so also to ancient Mesopotamian religion—is, we believe, a unique experience of confrontation with power not of this world. Rudolph Otto called this confrontation 'Numinous' and analyzed it as the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a confrontation with a 'Wholly Other' outside of normal experience and indescribable in its terms; terrifying, ranging from sheer demonic dread through awe to sublime majesty; and fascinating, with irresistible attraction, demanding unconditional allegiance. It is the positive human response to this experience in thought (myth and theology) and action (cult and worship) that constitutes religion." Thorkild Jacobsen<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest goddesses of the ancient world was the Sumerian Inanna who, as is well known, was explicitly identified with the planet Venus.<sup>2</sup> The cult of Inanna, upon being assimilated with that of the Semitic goddess Ishtar, would dominate the religious landscape of Mesopotamia for over two thousand years. As our earliest historical testimony documenting the observation and worship of the planet Venus, the literature surrounding Inanna must loom large in any discussion of that planet's role in ancient myth and religion.

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1. *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 3.

2. According to Wolfgang Heimpel, "A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities," *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4:3 (1982), p. 12, the identification of Inanna and Venus was first made in prehistoric times and is apparent "in all historical periods."

The cult of Inanna is prominent in the earliest temples yet excavated in Mesopotamia. At Uruk, the oldest urban site in the entire Near East, offerings to Inanna far outnumber those of any other deity.<sup>3</sup> In strata conventionally dated to c. 3000 BCE (Uruk IV-III), Inanna is already associated with various symbols which would become conspicuous in her later cult—the eight-pointed star or rosette, for example.<sup>4</sup>

It was during this period—Uruk IV/III—that writing first developed in Mesopotamia, later spreading to Egypt. Inanna's name, originally written with a pictograph transcribed as MUŠ<sub>3</sub>, is thought to depict a pole-like standard with reed stalks bound together in volutes (see figure one). In the earliest period (Uruk IV), the MUŠ<sub>3</sub> sign typically appears without the divine determinative, although exceptions do occur. In Uruk III texts, the sign is more often than not preceded by a divine determinative, the latter an eight-pointed star closely resembling a modern asterisk.<sup>5</sup> Inasmuch as the cuneiform determinative for "god" features a star, it stands to reason that Inanna was already identified with a celestial body during the archaic Uruk period. Szarzynska has expressed a similar view: "In the most archaic period the determinative dingir was associated with astral deities only."<sup>6</sup>

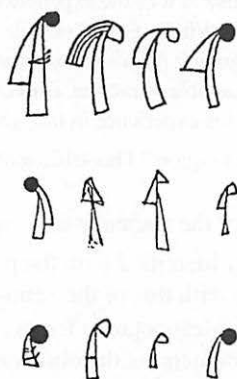


Figure one

That Inanna was already identified with the planet Venus in this early period is supported by a variety of evidence. Szarzynska has called attention to two epithets of

3. K. Szarzynska, *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), pp. 38, 115-140.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

5. Personal communication from Krystyna Szarzynska, March 22, 1997.

Inanna—UD and SIG—which have been translated as “morning” and “evening” respectively. Not surprisingly, these epithets have been interpreted as a reference to the planet-goddess’ appearance as morning-star and evening-star.<sup>7</sup> If this interpretation is to be admitted, it follows that Sumerian skywatchers recognized Venus’ phases nearly three thousand years before Parmenides, the Greek philosopher traditionally credited with this discovery.<sup>8</sup>

A significant body of hymns celebrating Inanna is preserved from the Akkadian dynasty of Sargon (the so-called Neo-Sumerian period, c. 2300 BCE). As scholars have pointed out, it is probable that this sacred literature includes some very ancient ideas, perhaps reflecting “archaic Sumerian tradition.”<sup>9</sup>

The cycle of hymns composed by Enheduanna, a daughter of Sargon himself, is representative of this period and literary genre. The hymn *nin-me-šár-ra*, generally known as “The Exaltation of Inanna,” rarely mentions the goddess by name. Rather, Inanna is invoked through a series of epithets such as “great queen of queens”<sup>10</sup> or “hierodule of An.”<sup>11</sup> As the planet Venus, Inanna is celebrated as the “senior queen of the heavenly foundations and zenith.”<sup>12</sup> It is also as a celestial body that Inanna appears as the “beloved bride” of Dumuzi.<sup>13</sup>

Other epithets of the goddess are less obviously associated with a celestial body, and consequently scholars have been led to interpret them without reference to Venus. Included here are those epithets describing Inanna as a great warrior and agent of the storm:

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6. K. Szarzynska, “Some of the Oldest Cult Symbols in Uruk,” *Jaarbericht Ex Orient Lux* 30 (1989), p. 11. It is Szarzynska’s opinion that the veneration of astral deities reaches back to the proto-Sumerian period, perhaps earlier. Personal communication March 22, 1997. See also that author’s discussion in *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), p. 142.
  7. *Idem*, “Offerings for the Goddess Inana in Archaic Uruk,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archéologie Orientale* 87 (1993), p. 9.
  8. Diog. Laert. IX, 23; Aetius II, 15, 7.
  9. K. Szarzynska, *Sumerica* (Warsaw, 1997), p. 148.
  10. W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 23.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 29.



"Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the land, When you roar at the earth like Thunder, no vegetation can stand up to you...Raining the fanned fire down upon the nation...Devastatrix of the lands, you are lent wings by the storm...Oh my lady, at the sound of you the lands bow down."<sup>14</sup>

Inanna is elsewhere likened to a charging storm, warring against the land:

"In the van of battle, everything is struck down by you. Oh my lady, (propelled) on your own wings, you peck away (at the land). In the guise of a charging storm, you charge. With a roaring storm your roar. With thunder you continually thunder. With all the evil winds you snort."<sup>15</sup>

Yet another hymn, quoted in the introduction, compares the goddess to a lightning storm:

"You make the heavens tremble and the earth quake. Great Priestess, who can soothe your troubled heart? You flash like lightning over the highlands; you throw your firebrands across the earth. Your deafening command...splits apart great mountains."<sup>16</sup>

A recurring epithet of the planet-goddess in these early texts—an al-dúb-ba ki sig-ga, "[she] who shakes the sky and makes the earth tremble"—emphasizes her destructive nature.<sup>17</sup>

Inanna's prowess as a warrior is a prominent theme in the Sumerian texts. Another early hymn, in-nin me-huš-a, generally known as "Inanna and Ebih," celebrates the goddess as follows:

"Great queen Inanna, expert at fomenting wars, destroyer of the enemy country...like a lion you have filled heaven and earth with your roaring, and you have made the people quake."<sup>18</sup>

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14. *Ibid.*, p. 15-17.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

16. D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *Inanna* (New York, 1983), p. 95.

17. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 83.

18. *Ebih* 5-9.

Inanna's warrior-aspect permeates the hymn "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra," also by Enhedu-anna. There Inanna is described as a terrifying warrior "clothed in awe-inspiring radiance," whose wrath unleashes a powerful flood which brings widespread destruction.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the goddess' path of destruction is said to extend "from the sunrise to the sunset."<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere in the same hymn the warrior-goddess is described as threatening the gods in heaven:

"She is a huge neckstock clamping down on the gods of the land, Her radiance covers the great mountain, silences the road, The gods of the land are panic-stricken by her heavy roar, At her uproar the Anunna-gods tremble like a solitary reed, At her shrieking they hide all together."<sup>21</sup>

If, in one passage, Inanna can be found threatening the gods, in another she is capable of causing an eclipse-like disturbance:

"When you are angrily staring that which is bright gets dark, you turn the midday light into darkness... Who can oppose your great deeds? You are the Lady of heaven and earth!"<sup>22</sup>

Significantly, the warrior-goddess is said to come "from heaven":

"Inanna, your triumph is terrible...[break in text] The Anunna-gods bow down their nose, they hurl themselves to the ground...you come *from* heaven."<sup>23</sup>

Does any of this language make sense in terms of the planet familiar to us? By what stretch of the imagination can the currently unobtrusive Venus be said to shake heaven and earth or rain fire?

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19. A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", ZA 65 (1976), p. 181.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189. Italics in the original translation by Sjöberg.

Apparent in these early hymns is the image of a planet-goddess of awe-inspiring power, to be feared as well as venerated. Witness the following passage, quoted earlier:

"To provoke shivers of fright, panic, trembling, and terror before the halo of your fearsome splendor, that is in your nature, oh Inanna!"<sup>24</sup>

Once again it is necessary to ask: What is there about the appearance or behavior of Venus that would evoke terror to the point of hysteria and panic?

The apparent incongruity between the goddess as planet and the goddess as warrior, together with various other peculiarities of her cult, has led scholars to suppose that Inanna's cult represents a jumble of contradictions. Samuel Kramer, for example, spoke of the "contrasting strands in Inanna's multi-faceted character."<sup>25</sup> Jacobsen, similarly, observed that "the offices attributed to her show little unity or pattern."<sup>26</sup>

Upon failing to discern a coherent pattern behind the various aspects of Inanna, scholars have proposed that a number of originally distinct goddesses merged to form a composite goddess. This was the view defended by Jacobsen, for example: "Actually Inanna has a good many more aspects than those which characterize her in her relations with Dumuzi, so many different ones in fact that one is inclined to wonder whether several, originally different deities have not here coalesced into one, the many-faceted goddess Inanna."<sup>27</sup>

It is our opinion that such views of Inanna's origins and fundamental nature miss the mark entirely. While it is impossible to dismiss entirely the possibility that syncretism played a minor role in the cult of the Sumerian goddess, the fact remains that the vast majority of the goddess' attributes make perfect sense in light of ancient conceptions surrounding the planet Venus. Even the planet-goddess' warrior-like character—the bane of scholarly attempts to find a rational explanation of Inanna's original nature—finds a ready explanation from this vantage point, Venus

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24. F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 118, with reference to A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", *ZA* 65 (1976), line 161.

25. Quoted from R. Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30:3 (1991), p. 262.

26. T. Jacobsen, "Mesopotamian Religion: An Overview," in M. Eliade ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), p. 459.

27. *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 135.

being everywhere regarded as an agent of war. In addition to al-'Uzza and Anahita from the ancient Near East, similar traditions surround Venus in China<sup>28</sup> and in the New World.<sup>29</sup>

### The Sacred Marriage Rite

One of the most important celebrations in ancient Mesopotamia was the so-called sacred marriage rite, designed to commemorate the primeval sexual union of Inanna and Dumuzi. Early texts confirm that the ritual performance was believed to ensure the fertility of the land and growth of crops. Of untold antiquity—a vase recovered from the Protoliterate period at Uruk (c. late 4th millennium BCE) depicts the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi<sup>30</sup>—the ritual appears to have died out after the Old Babylonian period.<sup>31</sup>

In actual practice, a “holy bed” or “garden” was prepared, after which the king would reenact the role of Dumuzi and have intercourse with a woman representing Inanna, the latter presumably an *entu*-priest of the goddess.<sup>32</sup> A leading scholar offered the following summary of the rite:

“It is clear that the central purpose of the Sacred Marriage Rite was to promote fertility in the land. The rationale of the ceremony was that by a kind of sympathetic act involving the sexual union of the king, playing the role of the *en* [typically personifying Dumuzi] with a woman, generally referred to simply as Inanna, the crops would come up abundantly and both the animal and human populations would have the desire and fertility to ensure that they would multiply.”<sup>33</sup>

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28. J. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought* (Buffalo, 1993), p. 76.

29. L. Schele & M. Miller, *The Blood of Kings* (New York, 1986), pp. 123, 214.

30. H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (New Haven, 1954), pp. 25-27. See also T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 209.

31. R. Kutscher, “The Cult of Dumuzi/Tammuz,” in J. Klein ed., *Bar-Ilan Studies in Assyriology Dedicated to Pinhas Artzi* (Ramat Gan, 1990), p. 41. Although references to a sacred marriage rite are to be found in the letters of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, human beings no longer take an active role in consummating the marriage of the goddess and her consort. See here the discussion of D. Frayne, “Notes on The Sacred Marriage Rite,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 42:1/2 (1985), cols. 11, 22.

32. D. Frayne, *op. cit.*, col. 14, 21.

33. *Ibid.*, col. 6.

Our most important source describing the rite is the marriage hymn of Iddin-Dagan, the third king of the First Dynasty of Isin (c. 1974-1954 BCE). The text begins by invoking Inanna as the planet Venus. Excerpts from the preamble follow:

"To the great [lady] of heaven, Inanna, I would say: 'Hail!' To the holy torch who fills the heaven, to the light, Inanna, to her who shines like daylight...Of the holy torch who fills the heaven, of her stance in heaven, like the moon and the sun...In heaven she surely stands, the good wild cow of An...With An she takes her seat upon the great throne...Upon them [the people, described as 'black heads'] my lady looks in a friendly way from the midst of heaven...At evening, the radiant star, [the Venus star], the great light which fills the heaven...She comes forth like the moon at night. She comes forth like bright daylight in the heat of noon...The lady, the amazement of the land, the solitary star, the Venus-star..."<sup>34</sup>

Here, as so often in Sumerian literature, Inanna is said to stand alongside Utu and Sin, two other celestial bodies conventionally identified with the sun and moon. Other lines, such as the penultimate one associating Venus with brilliance at noon, are more difficult to understand. One would not ordinarily describe Venus as being particularly bright at midday, the planet being all but impossible to distinguish at this time. Yet the ancient texts are quite explicit that Venus rivaled the sun in brilliance during the day: "By night she seems (as bright) as the moonlight, in the middle of the day she seems (as bright) as the sun."<sup>35</sup>

Equally puzzling is the passage, recurring as a refrain throughout the hymn, describing Inanna/Venus as standing at the midst (literally "heart") of heaven. Yet in its movements along the ecliptic, Venus never appears to rise more than 47 degrees above the horizon. Thus it can hardly be said to occupy the heart of heaven. Modern scholars, upon confronting such language, dismiss it as metaphorical: "Since astronomically such a position for Venus is excluded 'midst' must be taken figuratively."<sup>36</sup>

In the ensuing lines of the hymn, we learn that the rite was performed on the eve of the New Year. Although much about the rite remains mysterious, a few of the preparations are described in brief: offerings are given to Inanna; a throne is set up for the goddess and the king to share; a bed of reeds and cedar is constructed; and the

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34. D. Reisman, "Iddin-Dagan's Sacred Marriage Hymn," *JCS* 25 (1973), pp. 186-189.

35. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 160. This is Bruschweiler's translation of the previous passage.

36. E. Reiner, "Astral Magic," *Trans. Am. Phil. Soc.* 85:4 (1995), p. 23.

goddess bathes herself. The preparations being in order, the rite is consummated as the king—identified with Dumuzi—approaches the bed:

“The king approaches (her) pure lap proudly, He approaches the lap of Inanna proudly, Ama’usumgalanna lies down beside her, He caresses her pure lap...When the pure Inanna has stretched out on the bed, in (his) pure lap, She makes love with him on her bed.”<sup>37</sup>

As a prominent feature of New Year’s celebrations, the sacred marriage rite marked a most joyous occasion. Indeed, a period of feasting and revelry typically followed the consummation of the royal affair:

“The glad news of the successful accomplishment of the long rite having been communicated to the people who had been waiting in anxious expectation to learn the issue, there was an outburst of exultation and thanksgiving, followed by a great feast of which all partook, the newly-wedded pair, the visiting divinities, the whole multitude who, in gratitude for the fertility which was now assured, raised jubilant hymns to the sound of the lyre, flutes and drums.”<sup>38</sup>

Here, as in our previous discussion of various epithets describing Inanna as a warrior-goddess and agent of storm, it may appear that we have lost sight of our intended subject matter. For what could the peculiar details of the sacred marriage rite have to do with the planet Venus?

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37. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

38. E. van Buren, “The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944), p. 34.

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"These stories, however, had a point. They meant something. As we revisit them, we should also be trying to understand exactly how they once made the sky comprehensible. This requires mindful study of their content. Detailed analysis of the content of any celestial myth in turn should be directed to the revelation of the actual function of that myth."<sup>1</sup> E. C. Krupp

The Skidi Pawnee of the North American plains were inveterate sky-watchers. Indeed, it has been said that they were "obsessed with the planets"<sup>2</sup> and had "a sky oriented theology perhaps without parallel in human history."<sup>3</sup> The Skidi knew Venus as *cu•piritta•ka*, which translates literally as "female white star."<sup>4</sup> James Murie, a native Pawnee trained as an anthropologist under Alice Fletcher and Clark Wissler, summarized the lore concerning this planet as follows:

"The second god Tirawahat placed in the heavens was Evening Star, known to the white people as Venus...She was a beautiful woman. By speaking and waving her

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1. "Sky Tales and Why We Tell Them," in H. Selin ed., *Astronomy Across Cultures* (Dordrecht, 2000), p. 20.
  2. V. Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982), p. 82.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
  4. J. Murie, "Ceremonies of the Pawnee," *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 27 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 39.

hands she could perform wonders. Through this star and Morning Star all things were created. She is the mother of the Skiri.”<sup>5</sup>

Among the Pawnee, as among other peoples, the planet Venus was clearly distinguished from the “Morning Star,” the latter being identified with the planet Mars and envisaged as a powerful red warrior carrying a club. The central act of Skidi cosmogony saw the Martian warrior approach and eventually overcome the planet Venus. Through their union Creation unfolded. In describing the final act of the Creation myth, Linton states simply: “The Morning Star married the Evening Star.”<sup>6</sup>

The *hieros gamos* involving Mars and Venus was periodically reenacted during various sacred rites. On rare occasions, or when particularly dire circumstances warranted—the appearance of a comet, an epidemic, or some other portent—the Skidi offered a human sacrifice to the “Morning Star,” usually in the years when Mars appeared as a morning star.<sup>7</sup> Here a band of warriors would aid a man impersonating the Morning Star in raiding a neighboring campsite and kidnapping a young woman of choice. Along the way there was much singing and dancing, during which time the mythological deeds of the Martian warrior were recounted and celebrated. After capturing a suitable victim, the war-party returned to the Skidi village. For several months thereafter the priests prepared for the sacrifice and awaited signs for the most propitious time to perform it. The culmination of the rite saw the young woman—representing the Evening Star—being painted head to toe and outfitted with a curious fan-shaped headdress.<sup>8</sup> She was then led to a scaffold especially erected for the occasion where, on mounting the final rung, she was shot in the heart by an arrow from the bow of the figure impersonating the Morning Star. The priests in charge of the gruesome rite were careful to ensure that the girl’s blood was channeled to a cavity below the scaffold. This pit was lined with white feathers and represented the sacred garden of the planet-goddess: “The pit symbolized the Garden of the Evening Star from which all life originates.”<sup>9</sup>

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5. *Ibid.*

6. R. Linton, “The Sacrifice to Morning Star by the Skidi Pawnee,” *Leaflet Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology* 6 (1923), p. 5.

7. *Idem*, “The Origin of the Skidi Pawnee Sacrifice to the Morning Star,” *American Anthropologist* 28 (1928), p. 457. See also the detailed analysis by Von Del Chamberlain, *op. cit.*

8. See the photo on page 190 of E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991).

9. G. Weltfish, *The Lost Universe* (New York, 1965), p. 112.



In the Pawnee village, completion of the sacrifice was greeted with great rejoicing and a period of "ceremonial sexual license to promote fertility."<sup>10</sup>

Even from this brief summary it is obvious that the Skidi traditions surrounding "Evening Star"/Venus offer striking parallels to the Sumerian traditions surrounding Inanna/Venus. Not only does the planet embody the female principle, it is assigned a pivotal role in a sacred *hieros gamos* believed to ensure the fertility of the land. In both cultures a period of revelry and license followed the ritual enactment of the sacred marriage. Even the life-giving garden associated with the Pawnee planet-goddess finds a close counterpart in the Sumerian rites. There the planet-goddess Inanna was expressly compared to a "green garden":

"Deified kings who enacted the role of the bridegroom were said to be placed 'in the holy garden'. By analogous symbolism the divine bride was compared to a green garden."<sup>11</sup>

If we are to rule out diffusion as an explanation for the specific parallels adduced—there being no evidence and little likelihood of a Sumerian influence on Skidi culture—the question arises as to how to account for the striking convergence of mythical themes? The simplest explanation, as well as the most logical, is to trace the respective traditions to objective celestial phenomena involving Venus and Mars.

In *When Stars Came Down to Earth*, the astronomer Von Del Chamberlain conducted an extensive investigation into the historical and religious background of the Skidi traditions. He concluded that celestial events involving the planets inspired the Skidi myths and rituals: "The conjunctions of Venus and Mars do seem to be the key to the Skidi concept of celestial parentage."<sup>12</sup> With this judgement we can only concur. The question then arises: How are we to understand this mythical conjunction of planets from an astronomical standpoint?

Chamberlain hypothesized that the Pawnee tradition had reference to Mars' periodic journeys from the morning sky to the western evening sky, whereupon it could be viewed as participating in a "conjunction" with Venus, a view which has since been endorsed by other astronomers.<sup>13</sup> But how are we to understand the origin of

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10. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

11. E. van Buren, "The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia," *Orientalia* 13 (1944), p. 31.

12. V. Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (College Park, 1982), p. 84.

the specific motifs surrounding the respective planets given Chamberlain's hypothesis? Why was Venus represented as female? Why was Mars viewed as the prototypical masculine power? Why would the periodic, relatively mundane and unimpressive, conjunction of these two planets be linked to Creation and ideas of universal fertility? Not one of these questions receives clarification under the conventional view.

## Mars

Further investigation into the specific details of Pawnee lore reveals one anomaly after another. This is most apparent, perhaps, in the traditions surrounding Mars. Murie summarized the Skidi beliefs surrounding the red planet as follows:

"The first one he [Tirawahat] placed in the heavens was the morning star...The bed of flint is the one great source of fire whence the sun gets his light. This being was to stand on a hot bed of flint. He was dressed like a warrior and painted all over with red dust. His head was to be decked with soft down and he was to carry a war club. He was not a chief, but a warrior. He was to follow up all other stars and was to have greater powers than any other god in the heavens. Through him people were to be created and he would demand of the people an offering of a human being. He was to preside over one council of the gods and was to replenish fire for his brother, Sun. He was also to be the great power on the east side of the Milky Way. This is Mars, u•pirikucu? (literally, 'big star'), or the god of war. (Dorsey, 1904:3)"<sup>14</sup>

Several archetypal Martian motifs are discernible here. Mars as god of war is abundantly attested in the Old World, as we have documented at great length.<sup>15</sup> Prominent examples include the Babylonian Nergal and Greek Ares.

Archaeoastronomers would have us believe that Mars' intimate association with war has its origin in the planet's ruddy color. Ed Krupp, for example, has stated that "color may also explain why the planet is named for the god of war: Armed combat spills blood."<sup>16</sup>

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13. E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991), pp. 189-192.

14. J. Murie, "Ceremonies of the Pawnee," *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 27 (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 38-39.

15. E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses: The Planet Mars in Ancient Myth and Religion* (Ames, 1997).

It is our opinion that color associations alone will never account for the specific warrior characteristics shared by the Pawnee Mars and similar figures from the Old World, any more than they will explain the masculinity traditionally accorded Mars. As a case in point, consider the furor ascribed to the Pawnee Mars. As the Skidi warriors set out to capture a human victim for their sacrificial rites, they sang hymns celebrating the deeds of the Morning Star, one of which implored the warriors to assume a furor befitting the warrior-planet: "I became ferocious: I became like him."<sup>17</sup> Another hymn, quoting the Morning Star himself, had the following refrain: "This is the way I did when I became angry."<sup>18</sup> This practice, in turn, mirrors the words said to have been spoken by the warrior-planet as he set out to conquer Venus: "I become myself when I become angry."<sup>19</sup>

The planet Mars was renowned for its angry demeanor in the Old World as well.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Babylonian astronomical texts warn that if a person is born during the appearance of Mars he will be "quick to anger."<sup>21</sup> Similar beliefs prevailed for thousands of years and are well-attested in medieval astrological writings. Francis Bacon, for example, held that it was the nature of Mars to "excite men to anger, discord, and wars."<sup>22</sup> One of the seven deadly sins was named after the "anger" of Mars.<sup>23</sup>

Ancient war-gods identified with the planet Mars, such as the Babylonian Nergal, Greek Ares, and Latin Mars, were all associated with a berserker-like furor. Dumezil described the Latin Mars as follows:

"The ambiguous character of Mars, when he breaks loose on the field of battle, accounts for the epithet *caecus* given him by the poets. At a certain stage of furor, he abandons himself to his nature, destroying friend as well as foe...By virtue of

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16. E. Krupp, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

17. J. Murie, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

18. R. Linton, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20. E. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-135. See also G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969), pp. 165-197.

21. F. Rochberg-Halton, "Benefic and Malefic Planets in Babylonian Astrology," in E. Leichty et al. eds., *A Scientific Humanist: Studies in Memory of Abraham Sachs* (Philadelphia, 1988), p. 325.

22. *Opus majus*, 400.

23. A. Aveni, *Conversing With the Planets* (New York, 1992), p. 145.

these very qualities of furor and harshness, Mars is the surest bulwark of Rome against every aggressor.”<sup>24</sup>

In the New World, as well as the Old, warriors preparing for battle sought to evoke and emulate the furor of the planet-god. Murie described this aspect of Pawnee lore as follows:

“As they are about to attack the enemy, they seek to become filled with the spirit of the war god. When so filled, they become ferocious or angry. In this ritual the captive is present; but they sing this song because they are going to sacrifice her and must go through the ceremony in an angry, or warlike, mood. They must at least pretend to be angry. Morning Star is the war god and they are to act as if filled with his spirit.”<sup>25</sup>

The Skidi belief that there was an intimate connection between Mars and fire likewise conforms with Old World traditions, as the red planet is everywhere regarded as the “fire star.”<sup>26</sup> Such was the case in China,<sup>27</sup> for example, where Mars was said to portend “bane, grief, war, and murder.”<sup>28</sup> A Hellenistic name for the red planet—*Pyroeis*, “Fiery Star”—confirms that similar conceptions prevailed among the Greeks.<sup>29</sup> The Pahlavi Mars-god, Vahram, was the fire-god *par excellence*.<sup>30</sup>

Archaeoastronomers will doubtless point to Mars’ color to explain this widespread motif and, in truth, there is some justification for this view. But color associations alone will never explain the wealth of symbolism involved. Venus itself was intimately associated with the origin of fire in Pawnee lore, yet it does not typically present a red color. Witness the following tradition: “Evening Star (Venus) is the keeper of the firesticks which she received when she married Morning Star (Mars).”<sup>31</sup>

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24. G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), p. 229.

25. J. Murie, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

26. W. Eilers, *Sinn und Herkunft der Planetennamen* (München, 1976), pp. 74-75.

27. G. Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise* (Paris, 1875), p. 626.

28. E. Schafer, *Pacing the Void* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 215.

29. F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans* (New York, 1960), p.

27. See also the discussion in A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 90-91.

30. A. Scherer, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

Venus's association with fire, far from being a trivial aspect of Pawnee lore, forms a prominent element in their cosmology. The Skidi, like other aboriginal peoples, carried their "gods" around with them in bundles, the most sacred of which was named after the Evening Star. It was this bundle which contained the fire-drill:

"The Evening Star bundle was the highest in rank of all the bundles of the Skidi, and upon it rested the political organization of the bands...The Evening Star bundle priest was the grand high priest of the Skidi, and the keeper of the bundle the chief of the Skidi. This bundle was the only one to contain a fire drill, believed to have been given to Evening Star by Morning Star at the time of their marriage, and transferred to the people in the bundle."<sup>32</sup>

The Skidi were not alone in recognizing an intimate association between Venus and fire or firesticks. The Desana Indians of the Colombian rain forest relate the following tradition: "The Daughter of the Sun [Venus] invented fire and taught the people to make it with two little sticks of wood."<sup>33</sup> Firesticks also featured prominently in rituals celebrating the planet Venus amongst Australian Aborigines.<sup>34</sup>

If Venus was the keeper of the firesticks, then Mars was the fire drill itself or, alternately, the culture hero who introduced the fire-drill. Like other cultures, the Pawnee viewed the drilling fire stick as the masculine power, while the hearth symbolized the female power. In accordance with these conceptions, it was believed that the union of Mars and Venus was commemorated each time a fire was kindled:

"The Skiri also conceive of the firesticks as male and female. The idea is that the kindling of fire symbolized the vitalizing of the world as recounted in the creation. Specifically, the hearth represents the Evening Star and the drill the Morning Star in the act of creation."<sup>35</sup>

As bizarre as this mythical motif must appear to modern astronomers, very similar conceptions are to be found amongst other cultures as well. The sacred traditions

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31. J. Murie, "Ceremonies of the Pawnee—Part I: The Skiri," *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 27 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 31.

32. V. Del Chamberlain, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

33. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago, 1971), p. 35.

34. W. Warner, *A Black Civilization* (New York, 1937), p. 423.

35. J. Murie, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

of the Zuñi Indians of New Mexico likewise associate the "Morning Star" with the drilling of fire: "The rising of the Morning Star during the winter solstice ceremony marked the time for the kindling of the New Year fire."<sup>36</sup> Like the Skidi, the Zuñi believed that the drilling of the sacred fire was inseparably linked with the fertility of the land.<sup>37</sup>

The aboriginal peoples of Australia have also preserved a mythical reminiscence of the celestial agent responsible for first drilling fire. Pointing to the planet Mars, they say that it represents the fire-drill in the sky.<sup>38</sup>

The Skidi belief that the planet Mars was intimately associated with sexual activity and fertility likewise finds close parallels in the Old World. In Babylonian astronomical texts Mars was known as *Kakkab Balteša*, "Star of Wollust."<sup>39</sup> Very similar ideas are apparent among the Aborigines of South Australia, who believe that when Mars is at its brightest and "hottest" it is a sign of increased sexual desire.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Waiyungari—a warrior-hero of the Yaraldi tribe expressly identified with the planet Mars—was credited with an insatiable sexual appetite<sup>41</sup> and held to personify sexual activity and fertility.<sup>42</sup> Once again we are confronted with very widespread ideas which neither diffusion nor color associations can explain.

That the conjunction of Venus and Mars occurred in a catastrophic context is suggested by the Skidi tradition that a period of prolonged darkness preceded the Morning Star's cavorting with Venus. Thus it is reported that the "Morning Star traveled in darkness looking for her" (i.e., Venus).<sup>43</sup> That this is not merely a figurative reference to a typical starry night is indicated by instructions accompanying

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36. M. Jane Young, "Morning Star, Evening Star: Zuñi Traditional Stories," in R. Williamson & C. Farrer eds., *Earth and Sky* (Albuquerque, 1992), p. 79.

37. J. Frazer, *Balder the Beautiful* (London, 1963), p. 133.

38. D. Tunbridge, *Flinders Ranges Dreaming* (Canberra, 1988), p. 142.

39. E. Weidner, "Kakkab Balteša," *RA* 1 (Berlin, 1928), p. 395. Wollust translates as "sensual pleasure, voluptuousness, lust, debauchery."

40. P. A. Clarke, "The Aboriginal Cosmic Landscape of Southern South Australia," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 29:2 (1997), p. 138.

41. R. Berndt & C. Berndt, *The Speaking Land* (New York, 1988), p. 258.

42. D. Johnson, *Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney, 1998), p. 35.

43. R. Linton, "The Sacrifice to Morning Star by the Skidi Pawnee," *Leaflet Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology* 6 (1923), p. 13.

the rite of human sacrifice. There the chief priest, impersonating the Martian warrior, offers the following pronouncement upon overcoming a series of obstacles placed before him by Venus: "I have destroyed the regions once controlled by the mysterious woman who wanted darkness forever."<sup>44</sup>

As we will discover in a chapter to follow, a period of terrifying darkness is frequently said to accompany the destructive rampage of the Venus-goddess.

The point has been made, I trust, that there are certain very specific mythological motifs surrounding Venus and Mars, few of which find a ready or satisfactory explanation given their current behavior and appearance. The following list of questions, which we hope to explore in this series of volumes, underscores the depth of the mystery presented by ancient conceptions regarding these two planets.

1. Why was Venus regarded as the prototypical female power in nature?
2. Why was Mars regarded as the prototypical masculine power?
3. Why were Venus and Mars associated with a sacred marriage?
4. Why were Mars and Venus credited with initiating Creation?
5. Why were Venus and Mars credited with introducing the means of generating fire?
6. Why was Mars identified with the fire-drill?
7. Why was Venus identified with the hearth?
8. Why was Venus intimately associated with a sacred garden of abundance?
9. Why was Venus linked to a period of universal darkness?

I am confident that the theory defended here—the so-called the Saturn theory—holds the key to answering each and every question enumerated above and countless more besides. Yet before we attempt to outline this theory (in chapter six), it is necessary to review Venus' appearance in ancient art. For if the planet Venus only recently moved upon a radically different orbit, it stands to reason that this fact

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44. *Ibid.*

would not go unnoticed by ancient artists. And, in fact, there is a wealth of artistic evidence confirming Venus' cataclysmic past, hitherto overlooked by astronomers and mythologists alike.



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"If you have had your attention directed to the novelties of thought in your own lifetime, you will have observed that almost all really new ideas have a certain aspect of foolishness when they are first produced."<sup>1</sup> Alfred North Whitehead

The discovery in 1879 of spectacular paintings in the caves of Altamira (Spain) was initially met with disbelief and ridicule, so radical was the idea that art of such beauty and skill could have been created by men still living in the Stone Age. It was only after the discovery of similar finds in France, Portugal and elsewhere in Europe that the scientific world became forced to accept the reality of Paleolithic rock art. Indeed, we have since learned that rock art is abundant upon all inhabited continents and spans a period of time measured in millennia (the paintings of Altamira and Lascaux are dated to ca. 14-17,000 BP).<sup>2</sup>

During the Paleolithic age, rock art was devoted primarily to the realistic representation of various forms of wildlife, presumably objects of the hunt or associated in some way with rites of sympathetic magic.<sup>3</sup> Especially common are paintings of

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1. *Science and the Modern World* (New York, 1925).

2. For a general survey, particularly with regards to the dating of ancient rock art, see P. Bahn & J. Vertut, *Journey Through the Ice Age* (Berkeley, 1997).

3. See the discussion in A. Willcox, *The Rock Art of Africa* (London, 1984), pp. 1-5.

horses and wisent, the great bison that once roamed the steppes of Europe, although mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses, and other extinct fauna also appear.

It is during the Neolithic age that paintings and petroglyphs (images incised in rock) of celestial objects begin to proliferate. This artwork provides an abundant and enduring record of prehistoric man's intense interest in the stars and planets. It also serves to offer a possible check on our conclusions drawn from comparative mythology, much as the bones found on cave floors aid in identifying the animals depicted on the walls at Altamira and Lascaux. If the observation and veneration of the planet Venus were already prominent in the ancient Near East in the third millennium BCE, it stands to reason that interest in our so-called twin might be reflected in Neolithic rock art.

## Neolithic Suns

Among the most common petroglyphs are those typically interpreted as images of the sun. Included here are simple images featuring a circular disc from which "rays" emanate in all directions (see figure one).<sup>4</sup> Certainly this is how one might expect our forbears to have depicted the current solar orb.



Figure one

Other images, however, are more difficult to explain. Consider figure two, one of the most common images in all of ancient rock art.<sup>5</sup> It depicts what would appear to be a circular disc with a smaller orb set within its center. Of this image, Anati remarked:

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4. This image is adapted from M. Devlet, *Petroglify Mugur-Sargola* (Mockba, 1980), Figure 20, p. 237. Close parallels can be found in E. Twohig, *The Megalithic Art of Western Europe* (Oxford, 1981), Figures 49 and 217; and E. Anati, *Camonica Valley* (New York, 1961), p. 95.
  5. Adapted from E. Anati, *op. cit.*, p. 162. For a parallel from the New World, see R. Heizer & C. Clewlow, *Prehistoric Rock Art of California* (Ramona, 1973), Figure 329.

"This kind of symbolic representation of the sun is common to many primitive societies and ancient civilizations. It occurs in the ancient Near East, in the Far East, as well as in Europe and elsewhere."<sup>6</sup>



Figure two

Consider further the image represented in figure three.<sup>7</sup>



Figure three

How is it possible to explain the wheel-like "spokes" (typically four or eight in number) of this supposed solar-petroglyph by reference to the current sun? Of the "solar wheels," Anati observed: "A number of hypotheses have been advanced in an attempt to explain them, but none is truly satisfactory."<sup>8</sup> And yet this very image occurs throughout the ancient world! Most perplexing, perhaps, is the fact that such images occur in Neolithic contexts and thus predate by several millennia the invention of spoked wheels.

Even more difficult to reconcile with the current appearance of the sun is figure four, which depicts a flower-like object set upon an orb or "sun-disc."<sup>9</sup> Although

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6. E. Anati, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

7. See Figure 238 from E. Twohig, *op. cit.*; Figure 8:4 from A. Willcox, *The Rock Art of Africa* (London, 1984), p. 83; Figure 10 from L. Cressman, *Petroglyphs of Oregon* (Eugene, 1982), p. 20; Figure 24 from P. Schaafsma, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest* (Santa Fe, 1980), p. 44; Figure 208 from C. Dubelaar, *The Petroglyphs in the Guianas and Adjacent Areas of Brazil and Venezuela: An Inventory* (Los Angeles, 1986), p. 197.

8. E. Anati, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

9. This image, adapted from Cairn T of Loughcrew, Ireland, forms Figure 235 in E. Twohig, *The Megalithic Art of Western Europe* (Oxford, 1981).

less common than figures two and three, this image also has parallels around the world.<sup>10</sup>



Figure four

Figure five, finally, adds a pillar-like appendage to the aforementioned images.<sup>11</sup> Here again we are dealing with a petroglyph of global distribution, thought to depict the sun with “rays.”



Figure five

Although the various “sun-images” occur in a wide variety of artistic contexts, it is not uncommon to find them associated with scenes of apparent worship and ritual. Well known, for example, are engravings that depict people “offering salutations” to the sun-god with upraised arms. In Camonica Valley—one of the richest and most thoroughly excavated petroglyph sites in the world—Anati observes: “The carvings of the first period are limited to the depiction of one person praying, facing the sun—which is drawn as a disc with a dot in its center.”<sup>12</sup> Such scenes, coupled with the sun’s apparent prominence in ancient religion, have led scholars to assume

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10. For a parallel from the New World see R. Heizer & C. Clewlow, *op. cit.*, Figure 85.

11. Adapted from M. Naylor, *Authentic Indian Designs* (New York, 1975), p. 26. For examples of “suns” with pillars, see E. Anati, *op. cit.*, p. 162. See also Figures 189 and 283 from P. Schaafsma, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest* (Santa Fe, 1980), pp. 230 and 340; Figure 8.4 from A. Willcox, *The Rock Art of Africa* (London, 1984), p. 83; Figure 73 from C. Dubelaar, *The Petroglyphs in the Guianas and Adjacent Areas of Brazil and Venezuela: An Inventory* (Los Angeles, 1986), p. 87.

12. E. Anati, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

that the so-called solar images served some sort of religious purpose for the Stone Age artists and their communities.<sup>13</sup>

The anomalies presented by these images have not escaped the attention of scholars. Aside from the fact that each of them is routinely identified with the sun, the various "sun-images" would appear to have very little in common apart from the presence of a smaller orb in the center of a larger disc. In *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe*, Miranda Green offered the following observation:

"It is very difficult to interpret the exact meaning of these sun-like images occurring on passage-grave stones. If we may assume that the signs are symbolic, then either they are purely abstract or they represent something in the natural world."<sup>14</sup>

Willcox asks, not without some justification, why the ancients would need so many different symbols for the sun? Noting that "the forms claimed to be solar symbols do not really look like the sun," he would regard them as abstract in nature. Indeed, Willcox suggests the origin of these symbols is rooted in physiology.<sup>15</sup>

There would thus appear to be two schools of thought with regard to these so-called solar images: that which would regard them as rooted in the natural world, and thus representational in nature; and another which would regard them as abstract. Green adopts a middle road, accepting the images as originally inspired by celestial objects but not quite realistically executed:

"When we look at the way that mankind in ancient Europe depicted the image of the sun, we see immediately that [its] obvious circularity dominated his perception. But what is more interesting is that man did not simply look at the sun and copy what he saw to the best of his ability. He went further and interpreted and superimposed new images of the sun which were not based entirely on his visual perception."<sup>16</sup>

Why this should be the case is not intuitively obvious. Certainly it is possible that Neolithic artists, like artists today, drew abstract images of the various celestial

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

14. M. Green, *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe* (London, 1991), p. 27.

15. A. Willcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 97, 239-244.

16. M. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

bodies. But what is difficult to understand is why such images would come to predominate?

It is common, moreover, to find "solar" petroglyphs upon the same rock face with images of animals and people, the latter drawn in relatively realistic fashion. With respect to the rock art at Camonica Valley, Anati reported: "The scenes are engraved in realistic style and with great precision of detail."<sup>17</sup> Why, then, must we invoke subjective factors to explain the so-called "solar" petroglyphs?

There is a very simple answer to this question: it is simply unthinkable to consider the logical alternative—that the petroglyphs faithfully depict the ancient "sun."

Were one inclined to entertain this admittedly outlandish possibility, questions arise as to how to go about discovering the celestial reality behind the various "sun-images"? Inasmuch as writing did not yet exist at the time most of these images were created, it would appear that we have reached a dead end in our investigation. It is well known, however, that religious beliefs and sacred iconography are notoriously conservative in nature and thus it may be possible to trace our "sun-images" in later art. Should this prove to be the case, we might be able to gain some insight into the original significance of the prehistoric images by studying their historical counterparts.<sup>18</sup> With this strategy in mind, we turn to consider the pictographic evidence from the ancient Near East, where we will find that strikingly similar images appear amongst the earliest art and writing systems.

## PICTOGRAPHS OF THE SUN IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

It is well known that writing originated in the ancient Near East, first in Sumer and shortly thereafter in Egypt. In the earliest scripts, great reliance was placed upon pictographs in order to convey the message of the writer.<sup>19</sup> Initially, the various pictographs represented familiar objects as realistically as possible and thus in most cases it is possible to identify the natural objects depicted. Upon further evolution

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17. E. Anati, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

18. E. van Buren, "New Evidence Concerning an Eye-Divinity," *Iraq* 17 (1955), p. 172 offered the following observation: "Interpretations of a religious cult which originated in the dawn of civilization must necessarily be tentative or purely hypothetical. Its real significance can only be surmised from what we know of the traces of it which survived into later and more literate ages."

19. E. Budge, *Egyptian Language* (New York, 1983), p. 2; M. Thomsen, *The Sumerian Language* (Copenhagen, 1984), p. 20.

of the script, however, the signs took on an increasingly abstract character (particularly in Mesopotamia, the Egyptian script generally retaining its pictographic form).

Recognizable amongst the earliest pictographs of the Sumerians, Egyptians, and Chinese is the "solar" disc with central dot (our figure two). In both Egypt and China, this sign originally connoted "sun."<sup>20</sup> Other pictographs feature a rosette, a wheel-like disc, and the sun-disc upon a pillar and thus resemble our figures three-five. Such correspondences support the conclusion that a certain continuity exists between the images of prehistoric rock art and pictographic signs of early writing systems, a conclusion reached by scholars on other grounds.<sup>21</sup>

There would also appear to be a general continuity with respect to the objects of worship.<sup>22</sup> Thus it is well known that the sun-god featured prominently in the earliest pantheons of both Mesopotamia and Egypt. If we are looking for clues to the nature of the prehistoric sun-god, it is essential that we explore the sacred iconography of these celebrated civilizations.

The Akkadian sun-god was known as Shamash, and he was depicted in a wide variety of iconographical contexts. Countless cylinder seals and reliefs depict Shamash in anthropomorphic form emerging from a twin-peaked mountain, for example (see figure one in chapter seven).

Significantly, each of the so-called "sun-images" from the Neolithic period can be found in ancient Mesopotamia. Figure six shows the disc of Shamash with a central dot, much like our figure two.<sup>23</sup>

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20. J. Norman, *Chinese* (New York, 1988), p. 61; E. Budge, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

21. W. Arnett, *Predynastic Origin of Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (Washington DC., 1982), pp. 9-21; M. Uyanik, *Petroglyphs of South-Eastern Anatolia* (Graz, 1974), p. 15.

22. With respect to solar elements in Mesopotamian religious cult, B. Goff, *Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia* (New Haven, 1963), p. 89 concluded: "This study suggests that there was more continuity of religious values in prehistoric art than has usually been recognized."

23. Adapted from figure II:8 in L. al-Gailani Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals* (Malibu, 1988).



Figure six

Figure seven shows the disc of Shamash as an eight-spoked wheel, thereby offering a striking parallel to our figure three.<sup>24</sup> The same image, moreover, is frequently found perched atop a pole-like standard, raising further questions as to the objective basis of the image.<sup>25</sup> Remembering the pillar-like appendage associated with the so-called "sun images" in prehistoric rock art, one can't help but wonder whether the Akkadian symbol of Shamash atop a pillar-like standard represents a stylized vestige of the former.



Figure seven

24. Adapted from figure V:9 in *Ibid.*

25. See Figure E-8 in E. van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art* (Rome, 1945). According to van Buren, most examples of the disc on a post occur on cylinder seals of the Early Babylonian period and upon seal impressions on "Cappadocian" tablets.



Figure eight, finally, shows the solar disc as an eight-petaled flower, a striking parallel to our figure four.<sup>26</sup>



Figure eight

Yet another symbol for Shamash is shown in figure nine, attested already in Old Akkadian times.<sup>27</sup> In most cases the image features a circular disc, in the center of which appears a four-pointed star with wavy lines emanating between the points. Why would the ancient Akkadians have chosen to represent the sun with this particular symbol?



Figure nine

Shamash was also represented by a symbol which featured an eight-pointed star set against a circular disc (see figure ten).<sup>28</sup> Here, too, it is difficult to see much resemblance between this image and the current solar orb.

26. Adapted from Figure 264 in W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington D.C., 1910).

27. Adapted from H. Prinz, *op. cit.*, Tafel X: no. 1. See also B. Hrouda, "Göttersymbole und Attribute," *RA* 3 (Berlin, 1957-1971), p. 485.

28. Adapted from Figure III:5 in L. al-Gailani Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals* (Malibu, 1988). See also E. van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art* (Rome, 1945), p. 88.

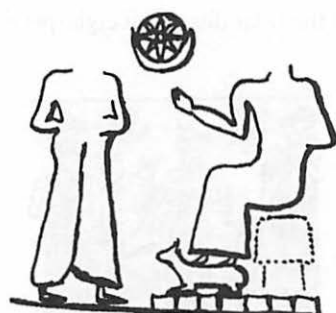


Figure ten

Why the various cultures of Mesopotamia would have elected to represent their sun-god Shamash with an 8-pointed star is a question which bears careful consideration. Indeed, a satisfactory answer to this question likely portends a revolution in our understanding of the solar system's recent history.

### THE VENUS STAR

The eight-pointed star is one of the oldest pictographs in all of ancient Mesopotamia, occurring already during the prehistoric period (see figure eleven).<sup>29</sup> The fact that the star-sign signified the concepts "star," "God," "Heaven," and "An" (among other things) is a clear indication of the celestial basis of Sumerian religion.<sup>30</sup>



Figure eleven

29. Adapted from R. Labat, *Manuel D'Épigraphie Akkadienne* (Paris, 1963), p. 48.

30. Jeremias made much the same point with respect to the astral nature of early Mesopotamian religion at the turn of the century. See A. Jeremias, "Sterne," *RML* 4 (Leipzig, 1909-1915), col. 1439.

Yet the eight-pointed star is also well-established as the special symbol of the planet Venus, being abundantly attested on Old Babylonian cylinder seals. With little variation, this symbol would persist for well over two millennia. Countless cylinder seals depict Inanna (or Ishtar) next to her star. Figure twelve shows the goddess holding an eight-pointed star.<sup>31</sup>



Figure twelve

The question naturally arises whether other celestial bodies were represented as eight-pointed stars on ancient cylinder seals? On the contrary, as Jastrow pointed out many years ago, Venus was the only planet represented in this fashion: "It may be proper to recall that on boundary stones and on cylinders, Venus alone is represented as a star."<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the 8-pointed star, the planet-goddess Inanna/Ishtar could also be denoted by several other symbols. Prominent among these is the rosette which—like the "star"—commonly adorns artistic scenes and objects deemed sacred to the great goddess. Figure thirteen shows a cylinder seal stemming from the Jemdet Nasr period (c. 3000 BCE).<sup>33</sup> It depicts a giant face, presumably that of the planet-

31. Adapted from Figure 2 in C. Wilcke, "Inanna/Ištar," *RA* 5 (Berlin, 1976-1980).

32. M. Jastrow, "Dil-Bat," *ZA* 22 (1909), p. 162.

goddess, distinguished by its bulging eyes together with several rosettes and a temple.

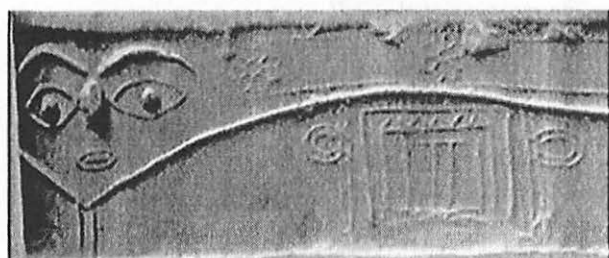


Figure thirteen

As to the antiquity of the rosette's association with the goddess, there can be little doubt. Thus van Buren notes: "From the earliest times the rosette was a symbol of the goddess Innin-Ishtar."<sup>34</sup> Significantly, early examples of the rosette closely resemble a star, featuring little more than eight "arms" or "petals" extending out from a central dot (see figure fourteen).<sup>35</sup> As van Buren points out, it is probable that the two symbols are cognates: "The eight-pointed star of IŠtar, frequently illustrated on monuments of the second and first millennia, was an adapted form of the archaic rosette as may be clearly seen from the star carved at the top of a kudurru from Susa."<sup>36</sup>



Figure fourteen

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33. Adapted from D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York, 1983), p. 27.

34. E. van Buren, "The Rosette in Mesopotamian Art," *ZA* 45 (1939), pp. 99-107.

35. Adapted from D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 67.

36. E. van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 105. R. Labat, *op. cit.*, p. 48 also relates the rosette to the eight-pointed star.

Consider further the scene represented in figure fifteen: Here the planet-goddess is pictured together with a "star," the latter of which resembles an eight-petaled flower.<sup>37</sup>



Figure fifteen

Our discussion of Venus-symbolism has direct relevance to the question posed earlier: what is the significance of the 8-pointed star adorning the disc of Shamash? Given the intimate association of the star with the planet Venus, the question arises as to what relation, if any, exists between the 8-pointed-star in the Shamash-symbol and that which signifies Venus? Does this convergence of iconography mean that artistic license prevailed amongst ancient skywatchers? Or does it perhaps commemorate some hitherto unrecognized relationship between Venus and the ancient sun-god?<sup>38</sup>

## THE SUN AND VENUS IN MESOAMERICA

Worship of the ancient sun-god and the planet Venus is as conspicuous in the New World as it is in the Old. Each of the so-called "sun images" (figures one through five) is found in prehistoric petroglyphs, as are the eight-pointed star and pentagram.<sup>39</sup>

37. Adapted from W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington D.C., 1910), Figure 407.

38. F. Steinmetzer, *Die babylonischen Kudurru (Grenzsteine) als Urkundenform* (Paderborn, 1922), p. 181, would explain the presence of the eight-pointed star on the disc of Shamash as an error on the part of the artist. Yet this view requires that the same "error" was perpetuated by other artists, as similar images are common on ancient cylinder seals. That the image faithfully depicts the ancient sun-god is supported by the fact that an 8-pointed star also graces the disc of the sun in Aztec iconography. See Figure 8e in A. Aveni, *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin, 1980).

In most cases, New World petroglyphs occur in contexts otherwise devoid of writing and thus it is difficult to be certain as to the identification of the celestial bodies depicted. Such is not the case in Mesoamerica, however, which reached an advanced stage of civilization under the Olmec and Maya. In addition to developing a sophisticated system of writing, the Maya were also skilled astronomers, capable of calculating the period of Venus to within a fraction of its true value. Early symbols and pictographs from Mesoamerica thus serve to provide an important check on our conclusions derived from analysis of Old World representations of the major celestial bodies.

A prominent characteristic of Mesoamerican astronomy was an obsession with the planet Venus. Like their counterparts in ancient Mesopotamia, Mesoamerican sky-watchers chronicled the movements of Venus with amazing diligence and accuracy. Of the Mexican preoccupation with Venus, a Spanish monk was led to report: "So accurately did they keep the record of the days when it appeared and disappeared that they never made a mistake."<sup>40</sup>

It would be difficult to overstate Venus' importance in Mesoamerican culture. Temples were constructed and aligned with the purpose of gaining the optimum view of the planet; various rituals, including human sacrifices and the practice of war, were timed to correspond with important aspects of the planet's orbit; even the calendar was designed to take into account the planet's movements. Sacred iconography associated with Venus is ubiquitous.<sup>41</sup>

Among the Maya and Aztecs, Venus was represented as a star. This was in keeping with its name "Great Star," a common epithet of the planet amongst various cultures in Mesoamerica.<sup>42</sup> Figure sixteen depicts an Aztec symbol for Venus.<sup>43</sup> This image bears comparison with the four-pointed star which adorns the disc of Sha-

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39. For examples of the five-pointed star see R. Heizer & C. Clewlow, *Prehistoric Rock Art of California* (Ramona, 1973), Figures 34, 37, 40, 91, 272; for examples of the eight-pointed star see Figures 298 and 364; for the eight-spoked "wheel," see Figures 47 and 371; for rosette-like images see Figures 76, 85, and 275. Examples of the "sun" with rays, "sun" with central dot, and "sun" with pillar can be found in great numbers throughout this book.

40. Quoted in A. Aveni, "Venus and the Maya," *American Scientist* 67 (May/June, 1979), p. 274.

41. S. Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya* (Austin, 1999), pp. 157-217. See also W. Nahm, "Maya Warfare and the Venus Year," *Mexicon* 16 (1994), pp. 6-10.

mash in figure nine. The resemblance is striking, down to and including the central dot within the four-fold star.



The same basic image is apparent in figure seventeen, a version of the Lamat-glyph, an acknowledged Maya glyph for Venus.<sup>44</sup> Here the star is set against a circular disc, not unlike that associated with Shamash in figure nine.



Figure seventeen

It is equally common, however, to find Venus depicted as a five-pointed star (see figure eighteen).<sup>45</sup>



Figure eighteen

42. M. Closs, "Venus in the Maya World: Glyphs, Gods and Associated Astronomical Phenomena," in M. Robertson ed., *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque* (Monterey, 1979), pp. 147-148; E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, 1975), p. 218. Similar names for Venus will be found around the world. The Polynesian Islanders, for example, refer to Venus as *Hokutoa*, "Great Star." M. Makemson, *The Morning Star Rises* (New Haven, 1941), pp. 141, 193-4, 207.

43. Adapted from L. Séjourné, *Burning Water* (Berkeley, 1976), p. 90.

44. Adapted from W. Gates, *An Outline Dictionary of Maya Glyphs* (New York, 1978), p. 149.

45. Adapted from Figure 1i in J. Carlson, *Venus-regulated Warfare and Ritual Sacrifice in Mesoamerica: Teotihuacan and the Cacaxtla "Star Wars" Connection* (College Park, 1991).

Here, too, the Mesoamerican symbol finds a close counterpart in the Babylonian cult of Ishtar/Venus (see figure nineteen).<sup>46</sup>



Figure nineteen

## THE QUINCUNX

As was the case in the ancient Near East, pictographs featured prominently in Mesoamerican systems of writing. Included among the most ancient pictographs is an abstract sign known as a quincunx from the appearance of four circles about a central diamond-shaped object (see figure twenty).<sup>47</sup> The quincunx is commonly found amongst the sacred iconography surrounding the planet Venus and, in fact, the usual form of the Venus glyph on Mayan codices features a quincunx.<sup>48</sup> Of this

46. Adapted from Figure 413 in W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington D.C., 1910).

47. Adapted from E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphics* (Norman, 1962), glyph 585.

48. B. Stross, "Some Observations on T585 (Quincunx) of the Maya Script," *Anthropological Linguistics* 28 (1986), p. 294. See also the discussion in S. Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya* (Austin, 1999), pp. 186-187.



pictograph, it has been said that: "The quincunx is the most frequently occurring sign in the Mesoamerican symbolic language."<sup>49</sup>

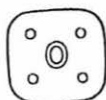


Figure twenty

Given the Maya's interest in astronomical matters, it is not surprising that other celestial objects also came to be represented on their imposing stone monuments and sacred stelae. The sun, for example, was commonly signified by a glyph known as the kin (see figure twenty one).<sup>50</sup> Of the kin-glyph, Thompson opined that it was probably derived from some type of four-petaled flower.<sup>51</sup>

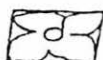


Figure twenty one

It is not uncommon, however, to find the quincunx-sign superimposed upon the kin-sign (see figure twenty two).<sup>52</sup> As to the meaning of this curious superimposition of glyphs, Thompson offers nary a clue, resting content with the following observation: "The quincunx is frequently set on the regular four-petaled kin glyph, apparently without altering its value in any way."<sup>53</sup>



Figure twenty two

49. L. Séjourné, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

50. Adapted from Figure 26:49 of E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, 1975).

51. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

52. Adapted from Figure 26:51 of E. Thompson, *op. cit.*

53. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

The reader will recognize at once that this is the very same situation we encountered in ancient symbols from the Old World. Again we ask: what could possibly be the significance of this bizarre convergence of iconography, whereby a sign associated with Venus is superimposed upon the sign of the sun?

Students of archaeoastronomy, confronted with this evidence from ancient hieroglyphs, might well be tempted to suggest that early scribes were attempting to illustrate some important celestial event, such as the inferior conjunction of Venus. The latter configuration recurs every 584 days or so when Venus passes directly between the Earth and the Sun. Yet Venus is invisible during inferior conjunction and thus this would appear to be a most unlikely explanation of the glyphs in question.<sup>54</sup>

Another possibility, of course, is to assume that modern scholars have erred in their identifications of the glyphs for the Sun and Venus. This too is highly unlikely. What, then, can be the explanation for the glyphs in question?

The position taken by this author accepts the ancient signs at face value—as faithful attempts to depict a planetary configuration in which Venus appeared to be superimposed against the backdrop of a much larger sun-like orb.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter we have documented that glaring anomalies distinguish the depiction of the various celestial bodies in ancient art. Prehistoric petroglyphs from around the world consistently portray the ancient sun-god in a fashion that bears little resemblance to the appearance of the current solar orb. Among the most common petroglyphs are those which show a “sun” in conjunction with a central dot, an eight-spoked body, or a rosette. Equally baffling are those images which show the “sun” equipped with a pillar-like appendage. The fact that the very same images appear amongst the earliest pictographs in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica not only confirms the extent and stubborn longevity of these sacred images, it also offers some justification for concluding that a continuity of beliefs (e.g. astral worship) underlies the use of common images through time. If so, there may be some hope of discovering the original significance of the prehistoric petroglyphs through analysis of their historical counterparts.

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54. The possibility that Venus could occasionally be observed during inferior conjunction has recently been considered.

In Mesopotamia, as we have seen, Shamash was represented by a symbol featuring a star set upon a circular disc. Yet the star originally signified the planet Venus, not only in Mesopotamia but in Mesoamerica as well. In light of the fact that the Babylonians and Maya are justly renowned for their astronomical prowess, particularly as it applied to the observation of Venus, we would venture forth the opinion that the stellar iconography surrounding this planet was primarily representational in nature and accurately reflected the appearance of Venus in prehistoric times. Support for this conclusion can be obtained upon systematic analysis of the prehistoric "sun-images." Certainly there is a remarkable resemblance between the Venusian star in figure eleven and the 8-spoked body adorning the sun-disc in figure three. Indeed, it is the opinion of this author that the 8-spoked body in the latter figure does in fact represent the planet Venus and thus marks a prehistoric analogue of the eight-pointed star which adorns the symbol of Shamash in figure seven.

It is also possible to recognize a certain affinity between the rosette in figures fourteen and fifteen and the flower-like object adorning the solar disc in figure four. That the rosette was one of the oldest symbols of Inanna/Venus is well-attested. Yet Venus was compared to a flower in other lands as well. Thus, a Maya name for Venus was *u lol zaz caan*, "the luminous (big) flower of the sky."<sup>55</sup> Chinese astronomers knew the planet as *Yin-sing*, "the flowery star."<sup>56</sup> Australian Aborigines from north-east Arnhem land preserved the same basic idea, referring to Venus as "the Lotus" or "lily star."<sup>57</sup> The fact that Venus today does not resemble a flower underscores the anomaly presented by these peculiar symbols and epithets associated with the Cytherean planet.

Having discussed the images depicted in figures three and four, we turn to figure two, the most familiar petroglyph of the "sun" and one of the most common images in all of ancient rock art. If we are to be consistent, the smaller orb is to be identified with the planet Venus.<sup>58</sup> That the same body could at one time be represented as a star and elsewhere as an eye-like orb upon the face of the sun-god need not represent a contradiction. In ancient times, perhaps, the planet went through cyclical phases, not unlike our current Moon, which alternately presents the appearance of a

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55. See W. Lamb, "Star Lore in the Yucatec Maya Dictionaries," in R. Williamson ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the Americas* (Los Altos, 1981), p. 234.

56. G. Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise* (Leiden, 1875), p. 134.

57. J. Isaacs, *Australian Dreaming* (Sydney, 1980), p. 148. See also D. Johnson, *Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney, 1998), p. 24.

58. In reality, the inner orb is composed of the superimposed orbs of Venus and Mars while in conjunction as per the illustration on the back cover

crescent and a circular disc. It is more likely, however, that the different images associated with the planet Venus represent different phases in the evolutionary history of the planet. It can be shown, in fact, that the planet Venus underwent various metamorphoses in appearance during its intimate association with Mars, Saturn, and the other bodies participating in the polar configuration (the latter forms the subject of the next chapter). Among the most memorable phases was that in which Venus appeared set within the center of Saturn (see the illustration on the back cover, where the green orb represents Venus). Given this celestial scenario, it is only natural that Venus would be envisaged as the central "eye" of the ancient sun-god (Saturn). In fact, Venus was identified with an eye throughout the ancient world. A Maya name for Venus was *Nohoch Ich*, "Great Eye."<sup>59</sup> Polynesian Islanders knew Venus as *Tamata-nui*, "Great Eye."<sup>60</sup> Similar ideas are attested among the aboriginal peoples of Australia, the Ringa-Ringaroo referring to Venus as *Mimungoona*, "Big Eye."<sup>61</sup>

As we will discover in a subsequent chapter, scholars investigating the Eye of Re—one of the most sacred symbols in all of Egyptian religion—likewise identified the Eye with Venus.<sup>62</sup> Yet the hieroglyph for Re is identical with our figure two!

## CONCLUSION

Like the polychrome paintings of bison and mammoths on the cave walls at Altamira, ancient images of the "sun" and Venus provide compelling evidence of lost worlds. The hypothesis that Venus and other planets moved upon radically different orbits in very recent times—during the Neolithic age, most likely—will no doubt be met with the same skepticism as that which greeted the discovery of the Paleolithic cave-paintings in the past century. Be that as it may, the testimony of ancient rock art is not to be explained away. Indeed, it is our opinion that ancient rock art offers a perfect complement to the explicit testimony of ancient mythical traditions, the latter likewise attesting to wholesale changes in the solar system.

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59. E. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

60. M. Makemson, *op. cit.*, pp. 194, 256.

61. E. M. Curr, *The Australian Race*, Vol. II (Melbourne, 1886), p. 351. I am indebted to A. Beggs, "The Story So Far," (March, 1990), an unpublished monograph, for this reference.

62. R. Anthes, "Mythology in Ancient Egypt," in S. Kramer ed., *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (New York, 1961), pp. 89-90.

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"When we meet a fact which contradicts a prevailing theory, we must accept the fact and abandon the theory, even when the theory is supported by great names and generally accepted."<sup>1</sup>

It has frequently been observed that anomalous facts are the key to discovery. The remarkable anomaly presented by the placement of the Venus-star upon the disc of Shamash, properly understood, is enough to warrant a wholesale rethinking of conventional theories pertaining to the recent history of the solar system. This statement will doubtless strike most readers as extreme to the point of absurdity. It can be shown, however, that the superimposition of the Venus-star upon the disc of Shamash is merely one of numerous anomalies attending the depiction of the ancient sun-god, all of which point to the same conclusion—namely, that the solar system has only recently suffered a radical reordering of its primary members.

Consider the situation illustrated in figure one.<sup>2</sup> Here the Shamash disc is set within the "horns" of Sin, the latter conventionally understood as the lunar crescent. This image is so common on ancient cylinder seals from Mesopotamia that it is

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1. C. Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (New York, 1957), p. 164.
  2. Adapted from plate V:9 in L. al-Gailani Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals* (Malibu, 1988).

easy to overlook the fact that the celestial scenario depicted is quite impossible in the current solar system, for the Sun can never appear to rest within the horns of the lunar crescent. This is because the lunar orb is nearer to the Earth than the Sun and only “shines” because of the reflected light of the latter; thus it follows that it could never present the form of a crescent when in inferior conjunction with the Sun (in fact, the Moon is invisible at this time). Such astronomical realities notwithstanding, the ancient artists were apparently adamant about such a relationship pertaining between Shamash and Sin, since they went out of their way to depict various images of the sun-god within the horns of a crescent. All of the so-called “sun” images discussed in the previous chapter appear set within a crescent on cylinder seals from ancient Mesopotamia as in rock art from around the world.



Figure one

Yet if the placement of the Shamash-disc within the horns of a crescent constitutes a perplexing problem for archaeoastronomers pondering these ancient cylinder seals, the placement of the Venus-star within the horns of the same crescent is even more remarkable (see figure two).<sup>3</sup> Here, too, the celestial scenario depicted is quite impossible given the current arrangement of the solar system and the conventional interpretation of Sin’s recumbent crescent as the Moon, for Venus can never appear to rest within the horns of the lunar crescent. Yet this very image is repre-

3. Adapted from Figure 1017 of P. Amiet, *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (Paris, 1961).

sented on numerous cylinder seals!<sup>4</sup> The same image can also be found on Babylonian kudurru from a much later time (c. 1300-600 BC).<sup>5</sup>



Figure two

Far from being confined to ancient Mesopotamia, this has proved to be one of the most enduring and popular images in all the world, still serving as the sacred symbol of Islam. Yet its origin remains a mystery, as one astronomer conceded:

“The star and crescent is one of the most common astronomical symbols in the world. Its origin is a mystery.”<sup>6</sup>

Also common among early seals is the depiction of the “sun”-disc and star set within the crescent (see figure three). The world’s foremost expert on ancient Near Eastern cylinder seals—Dominique Collon—offered the following “explanation” of this motif:

“From Ur III times onwards, however, the crescent is also often combined with a disc inscribed with a star which is placed within it (star-disc and crescent...). This

4. For an example, see B. Teissier, *Ancient Near Eastern Seals from the Marcopoli Collection* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 311, seal 696. See also Figures 138 and 139 in A. Jeremias, *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur* (Leipzig, 1913), p. 241.

5. F. Steinmetzer, *Die babylonischen Kudurru (Grenzsteine) als Urkundenform* (Paderborn, 1922), p. 181. Most kudurru were erected between 1307 and 1047 BC. See the discussion in J. Brinkman, “Kudurru,” *RA* 6 (Berlin, 1980-1983), p. 268.

6. B. Schaefer, “Heavenly Signs,” *New Scientist* 21/28 (December, 1981), p. 48.

could either be explained as different phases of the moon or, more likely, is a shorthand for the principal celestial bodies, sun (and star?) and moon.”<sup>7</sup>



Figure three

It is at this point that the diligent researcher must address fundamental questions of logic and common sense: Why would the ancient skywatchers have insisted upon depicting their planetary gods in astronomically impossible positions? If, upon examination of the ancient “sun-images,” one chooses to dismiss the specific and remarkably consistent imagery as the product of creative imagination and artistic license, one is also forced to accept the proposition that such (presumably) abstract forms are natural products of the human mind since they are found in great numbers around the globe. One will also be forced to dismiss the equally widespread mythological traditions corroborating the artistic traditions, such as reports that different suns prevailed in ancient times. This approach has little to recommend it, for it involves turning a deaf ear to the collective testimony of our ancestors and, in any case, has thus far produced precious few insights into the origin of ancient symbolism.

If, on the other hand, one is willing to entertain the possibility that such “sun-images” are realistic in nature and faithfully depict the ancient sun, it then becomes necessary to consider the seemingly outlandish possibility that various celestial bodies have shifted their orbits in recent times. Disturbing as this prospect will appear to many, it is the most logical explanation of the evidence at hand.

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7. D. Collon, “Mond,” *RA* 8 (Berlin, 1993-1997), p. 357.



It is our opinion that the aforementioned cylinder seals accurately depict the spatial relationship which formerly prevailed between Shamash, Venus, and Sin—that, in fact, they commemorate a “lost” solar system, one in which the planet Venus appeared to be superimposed upon a massive orb, the latter of which is to be distinguished from the current sun. Is there any evidence, then, that the various peoples of ancient Mesopotamia knew of a “sun” other than the one most familiar to us?

On this score the evidence is unequivocal: In numerous Assyrian and Babylonian astronomical texts Shamash is identified with the planet Saturn.<sup>8</sup> Saturn’s identification with Shamash is already attested to in omen texts from the thirteenth century BCE and likely reflects ideas much older still.<sup>9</sup> The same identification is commonplace in reports sent from Assyrian astronomers to various kings, such as Esarhaddon (c. 680-669) and Assurbanipal (c. 668-627), reports designed to keep the rulers abreast of omens to be read in the skies.<sup>10</sup> Just why a relatively inconspicuous planet such as Saturn would have been described as “the star of Shamash” has long puzzled scholars investigating these ancient texts.

Greek astronomical lore also preserves Saturn’s connection with the Sun.<sup>11</sup> With reference to the Babylonian star-worshippers, the chronicler Diodorus writes: “To the one we call Saturn they give a special name, ‘Sun-Star.’”<sup>12</sup> Various manuscripts of the *Epinomis*, traditionally ascribed to Plato but now thought to be the work of Philip of Opus, substitute the name Helios for Kronos, in apparent recognition of the ancient identification of Saturn as the star of the sun.<sup>13</sup> Hyginus, the author of a manual on Greek astronomy, describes the most distant planet as that “of Sol, others say of Saturn.”<sup>14</sup> Interesting also is a Greek ostrakon identifying the Egyptian sun god Ra with the planet Saturn.<sup>15</sup>

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8. M. Jastrow, “Sun and Saturn,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archéologie Orientale* 7 (1909), pp. 163-178.

9. U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology* (Copenhagen, 1995), p. 123, citing Emar IV/4 655:22’.

10. H. Hunger ed., *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* (Helsinki, 1995), pp. xvi, 24, 25, 28-29, 55, 92, 98-99, and throughout.

11. See here the discussion in A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 92-98.

12. II:30:3

13. See the discussion in L. Taran, *Academica: Plato, Philip of Opus, and the Pseudo-Platonic Epinomis* (Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 308-309.

14. II:42

Although it is probable that the Greek identification of Helios with the planet Saturn reflects Babylonian influence, the question remains as to how and why Saturn became identified with the ancient sun-god in the first place? Jastrow was among the first to attempt to solve this mystery:

“Strange as it may seem to us, the planet Saturn appears to have been regarded as ‘the sun of the night’ corresponding to Šamaš as ‘the sun of the daytime’ and the cause of such light as the night furnishes. It was argued, that since there was a sun furnishing the light of day, so there must be some corresponding power which causes the illuminations of the heavens at night. Saturn was chosen—in preference even to the moon—because of the slowness of its movement, which made it visible continuously for a long period, while Jupiter, Mars and Venus disappeared frequently during the same period, and the moon for several days at the end of each month; Mercury owing to its position near the sun was visible only for very short periods. The moon, moreover, altered its phases while Saturn as its name Lu-Bat Sag-Uš, i.e., the ‘steady’ planet indicates, remained ‘constant’—at least for a long period. The light of the moon as of the planets and stars was ascribed to Saturn.”<sup>16</sup>

Is it conceivable that the greatest astronomers of the ancient world would have believed that the relatively dim Saturn actually provided the light of the moon and planets, as Jastrow opines? This is strange reasoning indeed and might well be considered the epitome of a wild guess.

Jastrow’s explanation, not surprisingly, has not found favor with modern scholars. In a study of astrological conceptions in the ancient Near East, Koch-Westenholz summarized more recent attempts to explain Saturn’s identification with Shamash:

“Parpola suggests that this identification may be due to an association of Saturn’s Akkadian name [*Ka-a-a-ma-nu*], derived from the root *kun*, with *kittu*, ‘justice’, which is of course an attribute of Shamash. Another explanation offered by Pingree is that the sun’s hypsoma sets as Saturn’s rises. However, the earliest evidence for the hypsomata is from the seventh century B.C., and the association of Saturn and the sun is certainly older and far more entrenched in the tradition than warranted by such arcane speculations.”<sup>17</sup>

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15. F. Boll, “Kronos-Helios,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* XIX (1916-1919), p. 343.

16. M. Jastrow, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170.

17. U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology* (Copenhagen, 1995), p. 123.

The question remains: Why would the greatest astronomers of antiquity describe a distant speck of light as "the star of the sun"?

For a possible answer to this intriguing mystery, we turn to a most unlikely source—the maverick scholar Immanuel Velikovsky.

## THE POLAR CONFIGURATION

In *Worlds in Collision*, Immanuel Velikovsky argued that the planets only recently settled into their current orbits and that Venus, Mars, and Saturn were involved in spectacular cataclysms witnessed the world over. In that bold and highly controversial book, Velikovsky suggested that widely recurring mythical images—such as the warrior-goddess, witch, and fire-breathing dragon—originated in pre-scientific descriptions of terrifying events involving planetary agents.

It was while researching *Worlds in Collision* that Velikovsky deduced that the planet Saturn played a pivotal role in ancient mythology, a situation difficult to reconcile with its present modest appearance. This finding has since received additional support from the extensive researches of Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, who likewise found the ringed-planet to be a central figure in ancient mythology and religion.<sup>18</sup> While the authors of *Hamlet's Mill* favored a uniformitarian explanation of Saturn's prominence—they would explain the cataclysmic imagery in ancient myth as a reflection of the ancients' preoccupation with precession of the equinoxes—Velikovsky sought to account for Saturn's mythical status by speculating that the Earth had once stood in close proximity to the gas giant, with Saturn dominating the skies in sun-like fashion.<sup>19</sup>

De Santillana and von Dechend drew attention to yet another mystery surrounding Saturn—its intimate connection with the North Pole. In China, for example, Saturn was known as the "Genie of the Pivot," a name otherwise applied to the Pole Star.<sup>20</sup> Similar conceptions appear to have prevailed among the Iranians, who associated

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18. G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969).

19. See the discussion in I. Velikovsky, *Mankind in Amnesia* (New York, 1982), pp. 97-100.

20. J. Major, "Myth and Origins of Chinese Science," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 5 (1978), p. 5.

Kevan/Saturn with the Pole.<sup>21</sup> Puzzled by such traditions, the authors of *Hamlet's Mill* asked: "What has far-out Saturn to do with the Pole?"<sup>22</sup>

This mystery is directly linked to another, equally baffling: Throughout the ancient world, there is a consistent association of the ancient sun-god with the Pole. This idea is particularly prominent in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts, the world's oldest body of religious texts, as we will document in a chapter to follow.

Far from being confined to ancient Egypt, the idea that the ancient sun-god once resided at the Pole is also prominent in India. From his extensive researches into the archetypal symbols of ancient myth, E.A.S. Butterworth concluded:

"[The primeval sun] is not the natural sun of heaven, for it neither rises nor sets, but is, as it seems, ever in the zenith above the navel of the world. There are signs of an ambiguity between the pole star and the sun."<sup>23</sup>

Butterworth emphasized the following passage from the *Chandogya Upanishad*:

"Henceforth, after having risen in the zenith, he (the Sun) will no more rise or set. He will stand alone in the middle."<sup>24</sup>

Ananda Coomaraswamy, a leading scholar of Hindu symbolism, discovered the same bizarre relationship between the ancient sun and the Pole in Vedic sources. With apparent disregard for the astronomical difficulties posed by this finding, Coomaraswamy remarked: "It must not be overlooked that the polar and solar symbolisms are almost inseparably combined in the Vedic tradition."<sup>25</sup>

The sacred traditions of various cultures tell of a time when the sun stood motionless in the middle of heaven, a telltale sign of a polar sun. An Aztec tradition reported by Sahagún exemplifies this widespread theme:

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21. See the discussion in D. Talbott, *The Saturn Myth* (New York, 1980), p. 143.

22. *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969), p. 136.

23. E. Butterworth, *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth* (Berlin, 1970), p. 124.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 125, with reference to III.II. 1-3.

25. "Svayamatrnnā: Janua Coeli," in R. Lipsey ed., *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers* (Princeton, 1977), p. 484.

"When the sun began to rise it seemed very red and it lurched from side to side and none could look at it, for it took sight from the eyes, it shone, and threw out rays splendidly, and its rays split everywhere; and afterwards the moon rose in the same part of the east, on a par with the sun; first the sun, and behind it the moon. And those who tell tales say that they had the same light shining...After both had risen upon earth, they were still, not moving from one place, the sun and moon."<sup>26</sup>

The conjunction of the ancient sun and "moon" is yet another trademark of the polar sun.

The *Popol Vuh*, lauded as the "Mayan Bible," also alludes to a period when a stationary "sun" prevailed. Indeed, the primeval sun is explicitly distinguished from the current solar orb:

"Like a man was the sun when it showed itself...It showed itself when it was born and remained fixed in the sky like a mirror. Certainly it was not the same sun which we see, it is said in their old tales."<sup>27</sup>

The first scholars to conduct a systematic cross-cultural analysis of the "polar" sun traditions were David Talbott in *The Saturn Myth* and Dwardu Cardona in a series of articles in *Kronos*.<sup>28</sup> Inspired by Velikovsky's general thesis of planetary catastrophism and a brief outline of the catastrophist's ideas on Saturn's former prominence, Talbott conducted an extensive investigation of Saturn's role in ancient myth and religion. He discovered that the idea of Saturn as the ancient sun-god located at the Pole was surprisingly widespread. The question was how to explain it?

According to Talbott's reconstruction, the Earth once moved in close proximity to Saturn, apparently sharing a common axis of rotation, with the result that Saturn appeared fixed in the north polar sky as a gargantuan, awe-inspiring form. Hence the historical and logical rationale behind Saturn's reputation as a "polar sun."<sup>29</sup>

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26. Quoted from L. Séjourné, *Burning Water* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 76-77.

27. D. Goetz & S. Morley, *Popol Vuh* (Norman, 1972), p. 188.

28. D. Cardona, "The Sun of Night," *Kronos* 3:1 (1977), pp. 31-38; "The Mystery of the Pleiades," *Kronos* 3:4 (1978), pp. 24-44.

29. D. Talbott, *The Saturn Myth* (New York, 1980), pp. 37-42. This thesis has also been developed by Cardona and myself. D. Cardona, "Intimations of An Alien Sky," *Aeon* 2:5 (1991), pp. 5-34; E. Cochrane, "Suns and Planets in Neolithic Art," *Aeon* III:2 (1993), pp. 51-63.

Consistent with Talbott's hypothesis is the fact that the Akkadian name for the planet Saturn—Kaia<sup>30</sup>mànu—is derived from a root *kanu*, which means “to be firmly in place/to be stationary.”<sup>30</sup> Why this particular planet would be described as “stationary” is far from obvious, although archaeoastronomers would have us believe that this name has reference to Saturn's slow and steady progress throughout the heavens. But slow and steady is not to be confused with stationary. It is Saturn's explicit identification with Shamash, the ancient sun god, which suggests an explanation of the name: Kaia<sup>31</sup>mànu commemorates Saturn's former role as the “stationary” sun above the North Pole.

Among Talbott's most important findings was that the crescent of Sin originally had nothing to do with the current lunar orb; rather it traced to a brilliant crescent projected onto the orb of the gas giant Saturn/Shamash.<sup>31</sup> During this relatively brief period of axial alignment, lasting at most several thousand years, the orientation of the polar configuration with respect to the sun was such that a crescent appeared to adorn the disc of Saturn, the crescent circling around the ancient sun-god as the Earth rotated on its axis. In a masterful analysis of ancient Egyptian literature, art, and language, Talbott showed that the revolution of this crescent formed the visual basis for the mythological daily cycle.<sup>32</sup> During the primeval “day,” a recumbent crescent adorned the orb of Saturn, shining brilliantly. During the ancient “night,” the crescent appeared in an inverted position and was significantly diminished in brightness (see figure four).

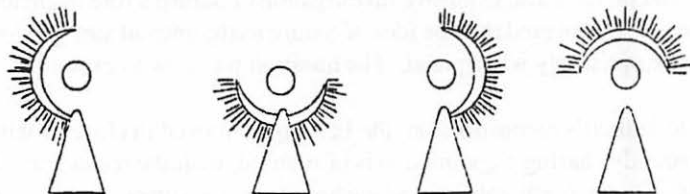


Figure four

The same celestial scenario would appear to be reflected in the ancient Sumerian writing system. The pictograph depicted in figure five, transcribed UD and signify-

30. D. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Groningen, 2000), pp. 68-69.

31. See the discussion in D. Talbott, “From Myth to a Physical Model,” *Aeon* 3:3 (1993), pp. 25-26.

32. D. Talbott, “The Ship of Heaven,” *Aeon* 1:3 (1988), pp. 57-96.

ing “day/morning,” shows a recumbent crescent with an orb (ostensibly the sun) set within its horns. The pictograph in figure six is transcribed SIG and signifies “night/evening;” it shows an inverted crescent with an orb nestled within it. Inasmuch as the earliest Sumerian pictographs typically represented familiar objects in the natural world, the celestial scenario depicted in such signs is difficult to discern apart from Talbott’s thesis.

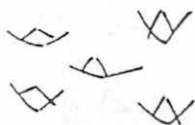


Figure five

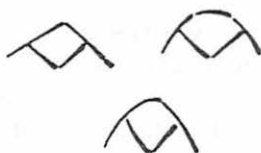


Figure six

There is a wealth of evidence that Venus and Mars also participated in the polar configuration associated with Saturn. According to the reconstruction offered by Talbott and myself, the planets Mars and Venus originally appeared in close proximity to Saturn, sharing a common axis of rotation together with the Earth. As the Earth-bound observer looked upwards, he saw a spectacular image—Saturn dominating the sky, with the much smaller Venus and Mars set within it like two concentric circles (see the illustration on the back cover).

Ancient images of the Shamash-disc, such as that in figure 7,<sup>33</sup> faithfully depict the cosmos associated with the planet Saturn as it appeared during one particularly memorable phase in the polar configuration’s history. Shamash/Saturn appeared to have a central “eye,” the “eye” actually consisting of the superimposed orbs of

33. Adapted from plate II:8 in L. al-Gailani Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals* (Malibu, 1988).

Venus and Mars. That this image forms a precise parallel to the Egyptian Re-sign is obvious.



Figure seven

As this planetary configuration evolved through time, the positions of the respective planets were subject to substantial displacement. The ebb and flow in the positions of the various planets along and about the axis provided a primary source of inspiration for the world's store of mythical themes and ultimately constitutes a vital chapter in the history of the gods.

Yet another memorable phase in the configuration's history saw a series of streamers or "rays" emanate out from Venus and across the disc of Saturn, thereby presenting a "star-like" appearance (see figure eight). For an indeterminate period of time, Venus presented eight streamers. At other times, four streamers were prominent, thereby presenting a cross-like apparition. Other prominent phases saw Venus assume a pentagram or diamond-like form in the midst of Saturn (see figures 14 and 15 in chapter five).

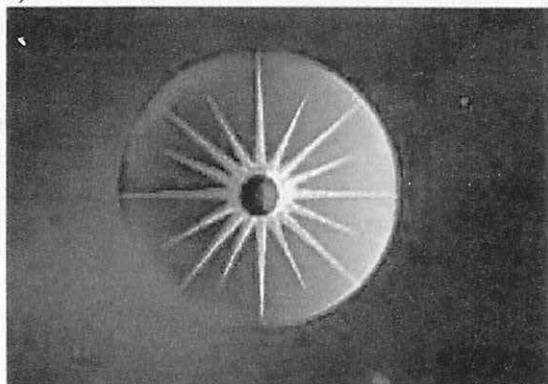


Figure eight



But what of the pillar-like appendage associated with various prehistoric "sun-images," as depicted in figure five in the previous chapter? As we have documented elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> this image likewise commemorates a specific phase in the history of the polar configuration, being intimately related to the mythical "birth" of the warrior-hero (Mars). This series of events saw Mars moving away from the center of Venus and descending along the axis towards Earth to a position visually beneath Saturn. As Mars descended from Saturn/Venus, it grew larger in form. At the same time a band of ethereal material became spread out between Mars and Earth, thereby giving rise to the appearance of a fiery pillar spanning the heavens or of a World Mountain which served as the dwelling place of the celestial gods.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Saturn theory is so bizarre at first sight that it may well seem more suited to a work of science fiction than to a work purporting to reconstruct the recent history of the solar system, the theory can be supported by a wealth of evidence and by employing conventional rules of logic. Thus, it is well known that depictions of the ancient sun god's epiphany form a common theme in art and literature from the Old and New World alike. It stands to reason that, if the theory defended here has merit, ancient descriptions of the sun's behavior will not accord with that of the current sun. Our discussion in chapter seven will focus on the testimony from the ancient Near East and, while necessarily somewhat technical in nature, it is hoped that it will serve as a launching pad for a radical reinterpretation of ancient cosmology in general.

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34. E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 97-113.

35. As Wal Thornhill has argued, there are reasons for believing that this luminous "pillar" originated as a result of plasma discharges associated with the unique configuration of planets. See his discussion in "The Electric Saturnian System," *Aeon* 6:1 (2001), pp. 40-41.

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"But the second discovery is far stranger—a solar system 123 light-years away, in the constellation Serpens, that harbors one 'ordinary' planet and another so huge—17 times as massive as Jupiter—that nobody can quite figure out what it can be. It is, says Marcy, 'a bit frightening.' What's frightening is that these discoveries make it clear how little astronomers know about planets."<sup>1</sup>

Among the most original and enduring types of art from the ancient Near East are the so-called cylinder seals, engraved stones which originally served as signs of ownership of property. Deriving from earlier stamp seals, cylinder seals first appeared in the fourth millennium BCE and remained popular for some three thousand years.<sup>2</sup>

It is commonly acknowledged that certain scenes on cylinder seals depict mythological episodes involving the gods.<sup>3</sup> Various aspects of Sumero-Akkadian cosmology would also appear to be illustrated. For example, a common motif on Akkadian cylinder seals shows the ancient sun-god Shamash "rising" from the twin

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1. M. Lemonick, "New Planetary Puzzlers," *Time* (Jan. 22, 2001), p. 51.

2. E. Porada, "Introduction," in E. Porada ed., *Ancient Art in Seals* (Princeton, 1980), p. 4.

3. P. Amiet, "The Mythological Repertory in Cylinder Seals of the Agade Period," in *Ibid.*, p. 35.

peaks of a mountain (see figure one).<sup>4</sup> In such scenes, the god is typically represented in anthropomorphic form either emerging from, or standing upon, the mountain.



Figure one

Early hymns to the ancient sun-god likewise invoke him in conjunction with a towering mountain:

“Šamaš, when you appear from the great mountain, from the great mountain, the mountain of the springs...there, where heaven and earth meet, from the ground of heaven you appear.”<sup>5</sup>

Why the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia would depict their ancient sun-god as rising from a mountain is a matter of some debate among scholars, as mountains are not prominent in Mesopotamia-proper, which occupies the alluvial plains around the rivers Euphrates and Tigris (there are mountains to the North and East).<sup>6</sup> Terrestrial geography notwithstanding, the mountain setting was traditional in Mesopotamian art, as Frankfort observed: “[The mountain] is in Mesopotamia the ‘religious landscape’ *par excellence*, as the reed marsh is of Egypt and the mound

4. Adapted from W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington, 1910), Figure 244. See also the extensive discussion in E. van Buren, “The Sun-God Rising,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’Archéologie Orientale* 49 (1955), pp. 1-14. There van Buren notes that the theme is confined to the Akkadian period. See also H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London, 1939), pp. 98-102.

5. A. Schollmeyer, *Sumerisch-babylonische Hymnen und Gebete an Šamaš* (Paderborn, 1912), p. 37.

6. W. Lambert, “The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon,” in C. Blacker & M. Loewe eds., *Ancient Cosmologies* (London, 1975), p. 42, describes Mesopotamia proper as “a flat desert area.”

of Golgotha in Christianity, and therefore the normal setting for the epiphany of the god.”<sup>7</sup>

A wealth of evidence indicates that the mountain of sunrise is not simply a metaphor for the eastern horizon or a terrestrial mountain to the east of Sumer. Indeed, it is our opinion that the twin-peaked mountain is entirely celestial in nature—the aforementioned World Mountain. Most conclusive in this regard is the fact that the mountain of sunrise also doubles as the mountain of sunset! This peculiar aspect of ancient cosmology is evident in the following passage from “The Gilgamesh Epic”:

“The name of the mountain is Mashu...Which every day keeps watch over the rising and setting of the sun, Whose peaks reach as high as the ‘banks of heaven’, And whose breast reaches down to the underworld.”<sup>8</sup>

Under the current arrangement of the solar system, needless to say, it is not possible for the Sun to rise and set over the same terrestrial mountain. As a result of the striking discordance between literary descriptions of Mashu and astronomical reality, some scholars have sought to find fault with Heidel’s literal translation of the passage in question:

“That the Mashu mountain(s) does so [keeps watch over the rising and setting of the sun] ‘every day,’ as translated by Heidel, Speiser, and others, is obviously wrong. Even if we stipulate, for the sake of peace, the idea of a terrestrial mountain, the Sun is not in the habit of rising on the same spot every day, and it needs no profound astronomical knowledge to become aware of this fact.”<sup>9</sup>

That it does not require much sophistication to be aware of the fact that the sun cannot rise and set upon the same mountain is certainly true. Hence the glaring anomaly presented by the fact that analogous traditions can be found throughout the ancient world. The sacred mountain of Hindu lore, Meru, likewise presided over the rising and setting of the ancient sun-god.<sup>10</sup> So, too, does the Egyptian “mountain” of sunrise known as the 𓆎.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is the very prevalence of this theme

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7. H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (New Haven, 1954), p. 112.

8. A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 65.

9. G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969), p. 293, footnote 18.

10. *Aitareya Brahmana* 14:6:44. See also the discussion in I. Mabbett, “The Symbolism of Mount Meru,” *History of Religions* (1983), p. 69.

that should alert us to the possibility that the ancients were describing a cosmos vastly different from that familiar to modern astronomers.

## VENUS

Ancient hymns celebrating Inanna/Ishtar as the planet Venus describe her as standing in close proximity to the ancient sun-god. On several occasions the Sumerian goddess is brought into direct connection with the site where the sun-god rises (ki-<sup>d</sup>utu-è-a). In "Inanna's Descent to the Underworld," for example, the goddess is introduced as follows: "I am Inanna of the place where the sun makes his rising."<sup>12</sup> Modern scholars, quite naturally, have sought to interpret such passages in terms of Venus' current role as Morning Star. According to this view, the phrase ki-<sup>d</sup>utu-è-a marks a metaphorical expression for the "East" or eastern horizon.

Upon closer examination, however, it can be shown that this phrase has reference to a specific site in heaven—the aforementioned mountain of sunrise. Thus, Sjöberg points out that the phrase ki-<sup>d</sup>utu-è-a marks a semantic parallel to *kur-<sup>d</sup>utu-è-a*, "the mountain where the sun rises."<sup>13</sup> If Sjöberg is right, as there is every reason to believe, one would expect to find the Venus-goddess elsewhere associated with the mountain of sunrise.

Venus' association with the mountain of sunrise is also confirmed by ancient art. Consider the Akkadian cylinder seal illustrated in figure two.<sup>14</sup> Here the planet goddess Inanna/Ishtar can be seen standing atop the mountain of sunrise, with Shamash just peaking through the cleft mountain during his "ascent." This scene drew the following observation from Amiet:

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11. J. Assmann, "Horizont," in *LÄ* 2 (1977), col. 3. See also the entry under *š*ḥt in R. Hanig, *Die Sprache der Pharonen* (Mainz, 1995), p. 13.

12. S. Kramer, "Sumerian Literature...", *Proc. Am. Philosophical Soc.* 85 (1942), p. 314. See also the discussion in A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 90, who translate the passage as follows: "I am Inanna of the place where the sun rises."

13. A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

14. Adapted from W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington D.C., 1910), Figure 407. D. Collon, "Ancient Near Eastern Seals," in D. Collon ed., *7000 Years of Seals* (London, 1997), p. 24 writes that this seal dates from c. 2300 BCE.

"The wings which she wears on rare occasions and the stars which sometimes top the weapons emerging from her shoulders confirm her celestial character...The image of the new goddess corresponds exactly to what is known of the Ishtar of the Semites, personification of the planet Venus."<sup>15</sup>



Figure two

Sumerian hymns also describe Inanna/Venus as intimately associated with a celestial mountain. Texts from archaic Uruk invoke Inanna-kur, "Inanna of (or from) the Kur," the latter word signifying "mountain."<sup>16</sup> The epic "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" describes Inanna as the "great lady of heaven" who "dwells on the top of the mountain."<sup>17</sup> "The Exaltation of Inanna" reports that the goddess "resides in the mountain."<sup>18</sup> Yet another hymn holds that Inanna "fills the mountain."<sup>19</sup>

Early hymns to the planet-goddess locate her various adventures on or about this mountain, alternately described as kur or kur-šuba, "the pure shining mountain." In "The Exaltation of Inanna," for example, Inanna is compared to a "flood descend-

15. P. Amiet, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

16. K. Szarzynska, "The Sumerian Goddess Inana-Kur," *Orientalia Varsoviensia* 1 (1987), pp. 7-8.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

18. A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", *ZA* 65 (1976), p. 179.

19. Quoted in A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 65.

ing from its mountain [kur].”<sup>20</sup> A related passage states that the mountain flood (kur-a-ma-ru) lies at her feet.<sup>21</sup>

The kur also figures in various epithets celebrating Inanna’s supreme status: Nin-kur-kur-a—“Lady of all the lands.”<sup>22</sup> The epithet kur-ra diri-ga signifies “she who dominates the kur.”<sup>23</sup> Yet another epithet—kur-gul-gul, “Devastatrix of the lands”—commemorates Inanna’s role in the destruction of this celestial mountain.<sup>24</sup>

The substantial amount of evidence linking Inanna/Venus to a celestial mountain prompts the question: How are we to understand such traditions? Samuel Kramer offered the following commentary on the mysterious kur associated with the Sumerian planet-goddess:

“One of the most difficult groups of concepts to identify and interpret is that represented by the Sumerian word *kur*. That one of its primary meanings is ‘mountain’ is attested by the fact that the sign used for it is actually a pictograph representing a mountain. From the meaning ‘mountain’ developed that of ‘foreign land,’ since the mountainous countries bordering Sumer were a constant menace to its people. *Kur* also came to mean ‘land’ in general; Sumer itself is described as *kur-gal*, ‘great land.’

But in addition the Sumerian word *kur* represented a cosmic concept. Thus it seems to be identical to a certain extent with the Sumerian *ki-gal*, ‘great below.’ Like *ki-gal*, therefore, it has the meaning ‘nether world’; indeed, in such poems as ‘Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World,’ and ‘Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World,’ the word regularly used for ‘nether world’ is *kur*. *Kur* thus cosmically conceived is the empty space between the earth’s crust and primeval sea.”<sup>25</sup>

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20. W. Hallo & J van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 15.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

23. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 79.

24. W. Hallo & J van Dijk, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

25. S. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 76. See now S. Kramer & J. Maier, *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God* (New York, 1989), pp. 82-83.

Kramer's cosmic mountain, it will be noticed, is conceived as a theoretical construct made of nothing but thin air. It is necessary to ask, however, whether such a metaphor could have served as the inspiration for the colorful traditions surrounding the dwelling-place of Shamash and Inanna, traditions which could be readily paralleled by others throughout the ancient world? Here we find ourselves in complete agreement with the opinion expressed by Henri Frankfort, who wrote as follows of the objective nature of ancient art: "Divine symbols are...based on something more definite than a poetical simile."<sup>26</sup>

Szarzynska also confessed a difficulty in understanding the original nature of the goddess' mountain:

"The problem of what the *kur* means in the above mentioned name [Inanna-kur], remains, for the time being, unsolved. It seems that *kur* 'mountain' in connection with the goddess indicates the mythological mountain, the place of her birth and her appearance."<sup>27</sup>

The difficulty, of course, is understanding why the planet Venus would be intimately associated with a particular mountain of any sort, cosmic or terrestrial.

Confronted with the apparent anomaly whereby the ancient sun-god and Venus cohabit atop the same mythical mountain, conventional scholars have little recourse but to fall back upon the seemingly all-purpose explanation of the Sun and Venus rising along the eastern horizon. Szarzynska's opinion may be taken as typical in this regard: "This meaning of the *kur* is connected in all probability with the mountains in the East of the Sumer-country, upon which the sun rises and the planet Venus appears."<sup>28</sup>

Such an interpretation, while convenient and much in vogue, will not stand up to scrutiny.

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26. H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London, 1939), p. 95.

27. K. Szarzynska, "The Sumerian Goddess Inana-Kur," *Orientalia Varsoviensia* 1 (1987), p. 11.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 13.



## THE MOUNTAIN OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Another name for the sacred mountain in Sumerian cosmology was *hursag*, invoked as "the mountain of heaven and earth" (*hur-sag-an-ki-bi-da*) in an early hymn.<sup>29</sup> This phrase has given rise to a lively controversy, some scholars understanding it in terms of the widespread theme of the World Mountain, others viewing it as a reference to an undefined mountain range to the east of Sumer. For the present purposes, we will proceed under the assumption that the *hursag* does indeed represent the Mesopotamian version of the World Mountain, a prominent fixture in many ancient cosmologies.<sup>30</sup>

In various ancient texts the *hursag* is interchangeable with the *kur*, and thus it is no surprise to find that Inanna/Venus is intimately associated with this sacred site as well. One text describes Inanna as seated upon the *hursag*: "(Inanna) who takes a seat on the highlands of the bright mountain, who adorns the dais of the bright mountain."<sup>31</sup> The radiance of Inanna is elsewhere said to envelop the great mountain.<sup>32</sup> In another hymn, Inanna is invoked as the lion (*pirig*) of the *hursag*.<sup>33</sup> That the planet Venus itself inspired this imagery is confirmed by various lines of evidence, not the least of which is that Inanna (as Venus) is explicitly described as the "lion who shines in the sky."<sup>34</sup>

If the presence of Venus atop the mountain of the Sun represents something of an enigma, more puzzling still are those passages which describe the planet Mars (*Nergal*) as occupying the same celestial mount! Thus, an ancient Sumerian hymn relates that *Nergal* was given the *hursag*-mountain (*hur-sag-ki-a*) as his special province.<sup>35</sup>

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29. See the discussion in E. Ebeling, "Gebirge," *RA* 3 (Berlin, 1957-1971), p. 177.

30. W. Lambert, "Kosmogonie," *RA* 6 (Berlin, 1980-1983), pp. 219-220; J. van Dijk, *Sumerische Götterlieder* (Heidelberg, 1960), p. 17; M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), pp. 99-102. See also R. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1972).

31. *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* 230-231 as quoted in A. Sjöberg ed., *The Sumerian Dictionary* (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 138.

32. A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", *ZA* 65 (1976), p. 179.

33. A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 79.

34. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 150.

Nergal is also intimately connected with the kur. Thus, an epithet of the Sumerian war-god characterizes him as En-ki-kur-ra, "lord of mountain land."<sup>36</sup>

Nergal is elsewhere said to rise "into the land of the rising sun [kur-utu-è]."<sup>37</sup> Here the word translated as "land" by von Weiher is none other than kur, so a perfectly literal translation would be "He who rises into the mountain of the rising sun." This interpretation is supported by another hymn which finds Nergal/Mars being invoked as follows: "You are horrifying like a flood, rising on the mountain [kur-u<sub>4</sub>-è] where the sun rises."<sup>38</sup>

In the face of these traditions, it must be acknowledged that Nergal/Mars was intimately connected with the mountain of sunrise. Yet how are we to explain this curious feature of Sumerian cosmology? For the fact is that, under the current arrangement of the solar system, Mars does not appear to rise in the East with the Sun. Indeed, the Sun and Mars are never visible together in the sky during those relatively rare occasions when Mars moves in close proximity to the Sun, the red planet only coming into view *after* the Sun has gone down. Moreover, when Mars does appear in the East, it is always faint and typically invisible, being then on the opposite side of the Sun and thus hundreds of millions of miles away from terrestrial viewers.<sup>39</sup> In short, while the passages invoking Venus/Inanna in conjunction with the mountain of the sun can be rationalized as having reference to Venus' current tendency to appear near the sun along the horizon, such is not the case with Mars.

Equally baffling from an astronomical standpoint are those passages in which Nergal/Mars is associated with the site of the sun's waning or disappearance. Witness the planet-god's epithet Lugal-ki-dù-sù-a: "King of the site of the Sun-set."<sup>40</sup> Once again we are presented with a glaring anomaly: What, if anything, does the

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35. A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 88.

36. K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 390. E. Ebeling, "Enkikurra," in *RA* 2 (Berlin, 1938), p. 382.

37. E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 35.

38. A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

39. J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, "Literary and Astronomical Evidence for a Total Eclipse of the Sun Observed in Ancient Ugarit on 3 May 1375 B. C.," *BSOAS* 33 (1970), pp. 468-469 write: "When Mars is near the sun, it is faint and is never visible until about half an hour after sunset." As these scholars note, an exception to this statement would be during a total eclipse of the sun, at which time Mars might appear more prominent.

planet Mars have to do with the site of the sunset? In the current arrangement of the solar system, the answer is simply “nothing.” In apparent recognition of this anomaly, scholars have sought to question the literal meaning of these epithets.<sup>41</sup>

But if one views the puzzling traditions surrounding Shamash, Inanna, and Nergal from the unique perspective offered by the Saturn theory, they can be shown to make perfect sense. As a polar sun, Shamash/Saturn did “rise” and “set” over the same twin-peaked mountain. As the “eye” of the ancient sun-god, Venus did reside atop the World Mountain, together with Shamash and Nergal/Mars. The expression “I am Inanna of the place where the sun makes his rising” describes this situation exactly. The planet Mars, finally, did govern the site associated with the “rising” and “setting” of the ancient sun-god.

## HEART OF HEAVEN

A prominent concept in Sumerian cosmology was the “heart” or “midst” of An (an.šà/qereb šamê), thought to signify the innermost space of heaven.<sup>42</sup> It was this site which presided over the daily epiphany of the sun god. Again and again in the Sumerian texts, the ancient sun-god is said to flare up from this site:

“Šamaš, when you make your appearance in the midst of heaven, the bolt of the shining heaven gives you greetings; the door-wings of heaven swear homage to you.”<sup>43</sup>

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40. K. Tallqvist, *op. cit.*, p. 390. See also the passage quoted in E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 15, where Nergal receives the epithet <sup>d</sup>lugal-u<sub>4</sub>-šú, “King of the site of the sun-set.”

41. A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 136, wrote as follows: “<sup>d</sup>lugal-ki-dù-sú-a and <sup>d</sup>lugal-dù-sú-a (epithets of Nergal) in St. Or. 7, p. 355; 390/91 are interpreted as King of the Sunset and King who effects the Sun-set. This interpretation is highly doubtful.” [Author’s translation from original German.]

42. F. Delitzsch, *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1896), p. 594. See also the discussion in P. Jensen, *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier* (Berlin, 1974), p. 10. The best modern discussion is that of W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, 1998), pp. 247-249.

43. A. Schollmeyer, *Sumerisch-babylonische Hymnen und Gebete an Šamaš* (Paderborn, 1912), p. 59.

"You are mighty over the mountain, you gaze upon the earth, you are suspended in the midst of heaven to the ends of the world."<sup>44</sup>

"Šamaš, from the ground of heaven you flame up [...] Šamaš, when you come forth from heaven, Šamaš, when you come forth from the midst of heaven..."<sup>45</sup>

"The midst of heaven," it must be said, would appear to be a very peculiar expression for the eastern horizon. Indeed, it is our opinion that the phrase has nothing whatsoever to do with the terrestrial horizon and points instead to the North polar region. How else are we to explain the Sumerian tradition that makes the "heart of heaven" the place of the sun-god's "setting" as well as his "rising"?<sup>46</sup> Although this tradition is virtually incomprehensible given the current arrangement of the solar system,<sup>47</sup> it conforms exactly with ancient ideas of the stationary polar sun. Viewed from the vantage point of the polar configuration, the Sumerian lore surrounding the "heart of heaven" can be seen to form a perfect complement to the traditions surrounding the World Mountain (Mashu), which likewise presided over the "rising" and "setting" of the ancient sun-god.

Several ancient texts report that Inanna/Venus was wont to appear in the "heart of heaven."<sup>48</sup> Iddin-Dagan's marriage hymn to Inanna, as we have seen, contains a recurring refrain wherein the goddess is described as looking down "from the midst of heaven."<sup>49</sup> Yet it is impossible for Venus to occupy such a position in the current arrangement of the solar system. Consequently, such passages have been dismissed as metaphorical by scholars investigating these texts. Witness the following disclaimer offered by Erica Reiner, a leading expert on ancient Babylonian planetary lore: "Since astronomically such a position for Venus is excluded 'midst' must be taken figuratively."<sup>50</sup>

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44. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

46. A. Jeremias, *Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur* (Leipzig, 1913), p. 33; P. Jensen, *op. cit.*, p. 10; W. Horowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

47. W. Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 248, remarks: "It is not clear, though, how the Sun-god might have passed from the western to eastern horizon at night through [the heart of heaven]."

48. STT 257 rev. 5f, as cited in E. Reiner, "Astral Magic," *Trans. Am. Phil. Soc.* 85:4 (1995), p. 23.

49. D. Reisman, "Iddin-Dagan's Sacred Marriage Hymn," *JCS* 25 (1973), p. 188, line 104 and elsewhere.

50. E. Reiner, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Under the reconstruction offered here, however, it is to be expected that the daily epiphany of the planet Venus would occur in the “heart of heaven” for it was formerly stationed in the center of the polar “sun” atop the World Mountain.

## THE GATES OF HEAVEN

A common motif on Akkadian cylinder seals depicts the sun-god as appearing from behind celestial gates or doors. This situation is also reflected in the ancient literature celebrating Shamash’s daily epiphany: “Opener of the doors of pure heaven; Šamaš...”<sup>51</sup> A similar hymn is the following:

“Šamaš, you lit up at the base of heaven. You opened the bolt of pure heaven. You opened the door of heaven.”<sup>52</sup>

If scholars have been sorely vexed trying to make sense of the mountain of sunrise/sunset, they have fared little better in explaining the gates of heaven. That there are no landmarks in the immediate vicinity of the sun which would provide an objective reference for “gates/doors” is readily apparent. Consequently, scholars have considered the “gates” of the ancient sun-god to be a figment of the ancient poets’ imagination: “No class of cylinders better illustrates the poetic imagination of a primitive people than those which give us the representation of the Sun-god Shamash emerging from the gates of morning and rising over the Eastern mountains.”<sup>53</sup>

The fact that other cultures around the world likewise described the ancient sun-god as appearing between two gates or doors would appear to contradict the notion that they are to be explained by “poetic imagination.”<sup>54</sup> This idea is prominent in ancient Egypt, for example.<sup>55</sup> Nearly two thousand years later Homer still remembers the “Gates of the Sun.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, the mystery remains: How are we to explain the widespread traditions of the “gates” of the sun?

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51. W. Heimpel, “The Sun at Night and the Doors of Heaven,” *JCS* 38/2 (1986), p. 134.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

53. W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington, 1910), p. 87.

54. For the gate of the sun among the Polynesian islanders, see M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), pp. 136-137.

55. H. Bonnet, “Tür und Tor,” *LÄ* 5 (Berlin, 1977), col. 782-784.

56. *Odyssey* 24:11-12.

The Saturn theory provides a ready answer to this age-old mystery: The two doors of the sun-god are simply the two peaks of the world mountain and thus have reference to the recumbent crescent which once adorned the ancient sun-god. Thus, as the ancient sun-god customarily appeared between the two peaks of the cosmic mount so, too, was it wont to appear between two doors or gates. A cylinder seal from Old Babylonian times appears to support this interpretation (see figure three): It shows the gates of the sun-god resting immediately atop the two peaks of the mountain, as if the former were merely extensions of the latter.<sup>57</sup>



Figure three

It is significant to note that the same imagery pervades the cult of Sin, the latter god being invoked as the opener of the doors of heaven. The expressions *pitu dalat Anu* and *pitu dalat šame* commemorate this aspect of his cult.<sup>58</sup> An important hymn relates the opening of the heavenly doors to the illumination of Sin: "Sin, as you become visible you open the doors of heaven."<sup>59</sup> Here is yet another passage which can only appear as an absurd poetic metaphor from the conventional perspective. Yet from the unique vantage point offered by the Saturn theory, this passage can be taken as a literal description of the polar configuration: As the crescent of Sin descended to a position beneath Saturn, as in figure four in chapter six, it grew brilliant, thereby signalling the opening of the doors/gates of heaven.

57. Adapted from W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington, 1910), Figure 245.

58. K. Tallqvist, *Akkadische Götterepitheta* (Helsingforsiae, 1938), p. 445.

59. RA 12 (1915) 191:3 as quoted in W. Heimpel, "The Sun at Night and the Doors of Heaven," *JCS* 38/2 (1986), p. 134.

## CONCLUSION

In the present chapter we have documented a host of anomalies in the ancient testimony surrounding the various celestial bodies. References to the ancient sun-god "rising" and "setting" atop the same mountain or at the "heart of heaven;" Venus appearing at the "heart of heaven;" Venus or Mars residing atop a celestial mountain; invisible doors of heaven associated with the cycle of Shamash and Sin; and others. Taken literally, not one of these traditions finds a ready explanation by reference to the current solar system. Yet each makes perfect sense when viewed in light of the reconstruction offered by the Saturn theory. The contrast between the position defended here and the conventional position could hardly be more striking. We maintain that the artistic record of the ancients—complete with various celestial bodies superimposed one upon the other—forms a perfect complement to the literary testimony and constitutes an objective portrait of the ancient skies. Mainstream scholarship, if it addresses these anomalies at all, typically dismisses them as the product of poetic metaphor and artistic license, with the result that its understanding of ancient cosmology remains the stuff of fiction.

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"But what do we need to know about the sky in order to get into the skin of ancient astronomer-astrologers...To begin with, we must temporarily divorce ourselves from the contemporary planetary imagery embossed on our minds by traditional learning. We must forget those indifferent, nonconscious worlds that move with blinding speed in elliptical orbits about a middle-sized yellow-hot star held fast by impersonal mathematical dictates. See Venus and Mars instead as the ancients saw them, and you begin to appreciate that, far from being fear-racked, backward individuals who cringed beneath a sullen sky, handicapped by never having tasted the fruits of modern science and technology, our predecessors were in a real sense more aware of the subtle essences of land, sea, and sky, more directly in contact with the world around them and the way its parts harmonized, and far more imaginative and expressive in their outlook toward it than most of us."<sup>1</sup> Anthony Aveni

How are we to explain the mythological deeds and attributes ascribed to the respective planets? The orthodox view, made fashionable by Franz Cumont and echoed by the majority of modern scholars, regards the planetary attributes as mythologically generated and hence largely arbitrary in nature:

"The qualities and influences which are attributed to them [the planets] are due sometimes to astronomical motives...But most frequently the reasons assigned are purely mythological."<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Conversing With the Planets* (New York, 1992), p. 11.



At first sight, this hypothesis seems perfectly sensible, for how else are we to explain the peculiar traditions associated with the various planets? Yet Cumont's hypothesis begins to break down as soon as one looks into planetary lore from a comparative standpoint. As a case in point, consider the intimate connection between Inanna/Venus and sacred marriage rites. Cumont and his followers, presumably, would have us believe that such conceptions originated with Sumerian religious practices and are wholly subjective in nature, stemming from the arbitrary identification of Inanna with Venus. The planet Jupiter, according to this school of thought, might just as easily have been assigned to Inanna and thus come to be associated with femininity and marriage rites. This is a reasonable position and not easily dismissed. Simply documenting that Inanna-like traditions and characteristics are associated with Venus in other Old World cultures—Greece, Canaan, India, China, etc.—is not sufficient to establish the observational basis of ancient planetary lore, as scholars can always point to diffusion as an explanation.

In order to test Cumont's hypothesis, it is necessary to perform a comparative analysis on planetary lore from areas free from Babylonian influence. The cultures of North and South America offer an obvious test-case here. If Venus' association with sacred marriage rites truly stems from the cult of Inanna and not from any objective phenomena associated with the planet, one would hardly expect to find similar traditions amongst New World skywatchers (That is, of course, unless one would be willing to entertain the extremely unlikely hypothesis of diffusion of Babylonian astral religion to the Americas). Hence the importance of the Pawnee traditions, wherein the planet Venus is associated with a sacred marriage believed to ensure universal fertility. The fact that New World traditions surrounding Venus preserve very specific mythical motifs mirroring those from the ancient Near East—the planet's association with war, gardens, and fertility, for example—constitutes a *prima facie* case for the thesis defended here, which holds that the characteristic mythological traditions surrounding the respective planets stem from objective astronomical events.

Yet if it be granted that it was the behavior of the planet Venus that inspired these widespread traditions, how are we to understand the sacred marriage theme from an astronomical standpoint? In the interpretation defended by Von Del Chamberlain and other astronomers, the Pawnee myth commemorates those relatively rare occasions wherein Mars journeys from the eastern skies and conjoins with Venus (as the Evening Star) in the West. According to this theory, a conjunction of the Pawnee

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2. F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans* (New York, 1960), pp. 66-67.

avatars of Venus and Mars necessarily involves the red planet moving *behind* Venus. This is because Mars' current outer orbit precludes it from ever appearing in front of Venus; consequently, it can only "conjoin" with Venus when it is on the other side of the Sun from Venus and Earth and thus many millions of miles removed from terrestrial mythmakers. Mars' diminutive size compared to Venus—at 6787 kilometers, its diameter is slightly more than half that of the Cytherean planet (12104 km)—coupled with its distance from the Earth during conjunction with Venus, renders such an event decidedly unspectacular and thus unlikely to inspire a myth of sexual union between dominant celestial powers signalling Creation and universal fertility. That one culture would develop such a detailed myth around such relatively inconspicuous conjunctions of Venus and Mars would be remarkable; that cultures in the New World as well as the Old would preserve analogous traditions is nothing short of miraculous.

Remember also our earlier objection to Del Chamberlain's hypothesis: Why would a conjunction of Venus and Mars, rather than one involving Venus and Jupiter or the Sun and the Moon, be regarded as a union of female and male powers? Why would rare and singularly unimpressive conjunctions of Venus and Mars be singled out as a subject for mythmaking and ritual celebration, given that conjunctions of the Sun and Moon were so much more prominent and captivating in nature?

This scenario contrasts sharply with the reconstruction offered by the Saturn theory, wherein the planet Mars is placed *between* terrestrial skywatchers and Venus. Under this interpretation, Mars and Venus are moving very close to Earth while sharing a common axis of rotation, thereby allowing for an extraordinary and sustained conjunction of truly colossal planetary forms. Such a conjunction would be a sight to behold and fascinating to the point of fixation.

As we have outlined elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> Mars' slightly elliptical orbit during the period in question caused it to periodically ascend and then descend the polar axis, alternately moving towards Venus and then away. Mars' relative diminutiveness as compared to Venus, far from being a detriment to understanding myths describing their primeval conjunction, actually serves to offer numerous crucial tests of the Saturn theory. This is because its size allowed the red planet to appear to visually enter the larger body of Venus during ascent along the polar axis (see the illustration on the back cover). A systematic analysis of ancient myth will show that this particular conjunction of Venus and Mars inspired countless mythical interpretations. At the apex of its orbit, for example, wherein Mars was enclosed by Venus, the red

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3. *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 138-158.

planet was interpreted as having penetrated or "impregnated" the mother goddess. The same events were alternately interpreted as the red planet having reentered Venus' womb, whereupon it was viewed as the planet-goddess' unborn "embryo" or "seed." Mars' eventual movement away from Venus and descent towards Earth, by the same logic, was interpreted as its mythical "birth." The birth of Mars and nearly simultaneous formation of the polar column, together with the appearance of the crescent, formed central events in the Creation, as Talbott and I have documented.<sup>4</sup>

The witnessed "birth" of Mars from Venus doubtless provided much of the logical rationale behind the widespread belief that Venus was a female power. The prolonged and spectacular conjunction of Venus and Mars, commonly interpreted as a *hieros gamos*, also contributed to this idea. Another important factor in the sexualization of the two planets was the fact that, during the primeval conjunction, Mars appeared to whirl about the axis in frenetic fashion, thereby inspiring traditions of passionate lovemaking or "dancing" as well as "boring" and "drilling." As the active agent in the prototypical *hieros gamos*, Mars was viewed as a masculine power. As the celestial matrix on which the "drilling" was seemingly performed, Venus was viewed as a female entity.

A systematic analysis of ancient ritual, in turn, will show that cultures all over the globe sought to ritually reenact the events in question by imitating the behavior of the two planets. If, as in Mesopotamia, some cultures commemorated the dramatic conjunction with a performance of the sacred marriage rite, other cultures commemorated them through the ritual drilling of fire. As Mars was viewed as the masculine force *par excellence*—the paramour of Venus—so, too, was it celebrated as the prototypical fire-drill or driller of fire.

In ancient Mesopotamia, the ritual celebration of the *hieros gamos* formed a prominent feature in New Year's rites and was believed to herald a new Creation while ensuring universal fertility. Yet the performance of the ritual drilling of fire was also associated with ideas of Creation and the restoration of universal fertility, a fact difficult to explain apart from the thesis defended here, whereby the one ritual is interpreted as a symbolic equivalent of the other.

It remains to be explained why Venus should be associated with fertility, vegetation, and the greening of the world. That Venus was intimately associated with fertility is

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4. D. Talbott, "Mother Goddess and Warrior-Hero," *Aeon* 1:5 (1988), pp. 38-65; E. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-114.

everywhere apparent. Such was the case amongst the Maya and Aztecs, for example.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Israelites sought to worship the "Queen of Heaven" precisely because she was thought to grant fertility.<sup>6</sup> In Africa as well, Venus was commonly believed to have a positive influence on fertility.<sup>7</sup> Among the Karanga, where Venus was known as Nehanda, the planet-goddess' shrine was deemed "the cosmic centre, the symbol of the centre or heart of the world," the same site also representing the "centre of fertility and of all life."<sup>8</sup> Such conceptions can't help but recall the Sumerian tradition that Inanna/Venus shone forth from the "heart of heaven."

The Ringa-Ringaroo, an aboriginal tribe of Australia, describe the planet Venus as a fertile country:

"The Ringa-Ringaroo call the star Venus *mimungoona*, or big-eye, and believe that it is a fertile country covered with *bappa*, the name of a sort of grass, the seeds of which the tribes here in earth convert into flour."<sup>9</sup>

How are we to understand such traditions? It stands to reason that Venus' association with flower-like forms and the origin of flowers contributed to its reputation as a promoter of fertility and the greening of the world. Recall the Inca tradition, quoted earlier, describing Venus as the "originator of the flowers." Venus itself, as we have seen, was known as the "Flower-star" among the Maya and Chinese. Analogous ideas are apparent among the Australian Aborigines from north-east Arnhem land, who compare Venus to a celestial "Lotus."

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5. I. Šprajc, "The Venus-Maize Complex in the Mesoamerican World View: Part II," *JHA* 24 (1993), pp. S27-S46.
  6. *Jeremiah* 7:18; 44:17-18.
  7. P. Breutz, "Sotho-Tswana Celestial Concepts," in *Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honour of N. J. van Warmelo* (Pretoria, 1969), p. 206.
  8. H. von Sicard, "Karanga Stars," *NADA* 19 (1943), p. 48.
  9. E. M. Curr, *The Australian Race*, Vol. 2 (Melbourne, 1886), p. 351.

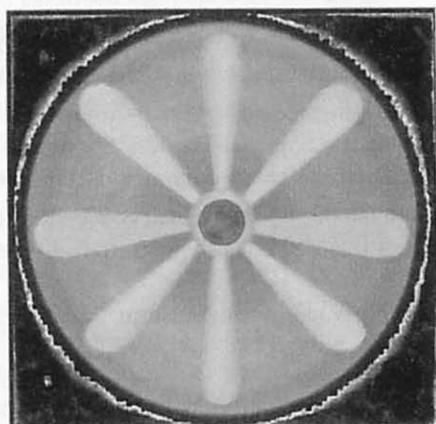


Figure one

Such traditions, in our opinion, reflect the fact that Venus itself presented a luminous “flower-like” form during a singular phase in the history of the polar configuration (see figure one).<sup>10</sup> This event alone would have been enough to inspire traditions of a “flowering” or flourishing of vegetation in the wake of a celestial *hieros gamos* involving Venus. Yet there are reasons for thinking that the answer is even more dramatic still. Thus, a wealth of evidence indicates that Venus presented a brilliant green color during its tenure in the polar configuration.

That Venus was widely associated with the color green has been documented by us elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> An early example of this motif occurs in “Inanna’s Descent to the Underworld;” there the planet Venus, as Inanna, is described as hanging upon a great wall and as being of a putrid green color.<sup>12</sup> In Babylonian astronomical texts Venus was known as the “Green star.”<sup>13</sup> Analogous beliefs are to be found in

10. Picture courtesy of Dave Talbott.

11. E. Cochrane, “The Birth of Athena,” *Aeon* II:3 (1990), pp. 25ff. See also the discussion in E. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (New York, 1991), pp. 183-184.

12. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 57.

13. E. Reiner & D. Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens: Part Three* (Groningen, 1998), p. 249.

numerous alchemical texts from medieval Europe, wherein the name of Venus became synonymous with the color green.<sup>14</sup>

Similar conceptions are attested in the New World. Thus, the Mescalero Apache knew Venus as *suus bik? edalat!?* *izhe?*, "Blue/Green star."<sup>15</sup>

If Venus' unique appearance during its history in the polar configuration allows us to understand its intimate association with the color green, fertility, and flowers, it also provides the necessary backdrop for understanding why the sacred marriage of Mars and Venus became linked to the "greening of the world" and ideas of universal fertility. The Sumerian descriptions of the sacred marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi take on an entirely new meaning when viewed in this light: "After bathing her holy lap, they cohabit, and not surprisingly vegetation flourishes all about them: 'At the king's lap stood the rising cedar, Plants rose high by his side, Grains rose high by his side,...and gardens flourished luxuriantly by his side.'"<sup>16</sup> The planet-goddess herself, as we have seen in a previous chapter, was expressly compared to a green garden:

"Deified kings who enacted the role of the bridegroom were said to be placed 'in the holy garden'. By analogous symbolism the divine bride was compared to a green garden."<sup>17</sup>

In complete accordance with this multi-faceted symbolism, Sumerian scribes described Inanna/Venus as the celestial power in charge of fertility and a plentiful harvest. Witness the following hymn:

"Like a light she is shining down from the sky...In her hands she is keeping the abundance of the land."<sup>18</sup>

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14. Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 288-289.

15. C. Farrer, "Mescalero Apache Terminology for Venus," *Archaeoastronomy* 9 (1986), p. 60. There the author adds: "This latter term also translates as star blue/green under it; however, the difference is one of emphasis...It gives emphasis to the characteristic glow of color Apaches perceive to be part of Venus."

16. S. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite* (Bloomington, 1969), p. 59.

17. E. van Buren, "The Sacred Marriage in Early Times in Mesopotamia," *Orientalia* 13 (1944), p. 31.

18. A. Sjöberg, "A Hymn to Inanna and Her Self-Praise," *JCS* 40:2 (1988), p. 169.

That such language is not mere hyperbole is confirmed by the Pawnee belief that all life originates from Venus' garden.<sup>19</sup> The Skidi tradition, in turn, finds a striking parallel in the Karanga belief that Venus represents the "centre of fertility and of all life."

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19. G. Weltfish, *The Lost Universe* (New York, 1965), p. 112.

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"All that he [Homer] hath said of Venus and of Mars his passion, is also manifestly composed from no other source than this science [astrology]. Indeed, it is the conjuncture of Venus and Mars that creates the poetry of Homer."<sup>1</sup> Lucian

Throughout the ancient world, one is everywhere confronted by the numen of the mother goddess. Intimately associated with a seemingly endless array of phenomena—love, birth, death, fertility, war, weaving, magic, kingship, marriage, maidenhood, mourning, etc.—the goddess was invoked at most of the principal rituals and functions that characterize culture. Her titles, befitting her many areas of influence, are legion: Queen of Heaven, Kore, Harlot, Mother Earth, Warrior, Queen of the Underworld, etc. If her cult is no longer as ubiquitous as it once was, it is still very much alive, having been gradually sublimated and assimilated into countless niches of modern religious experience. It is well known, for example, that various aspects of the mother goddess' cult have been absorbed by the worship of the Virgin Mary.<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves might as well have been speaking for the masses everywhere when he wrote of the mother goddess that she is "deeply fixed in the racial memory of the European countryman and impossible to exorcize."<sup>3</sup>

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1. *On Astrology*, 22.

2. See here R. Briffault, *The Mothers* (New York, 1963), pp. 378, 429; R. Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York, 1948), pp. 393-397; and H. Hislop, *The Two Babylons* (Neptune, N.J., 1959).



Among ancient cultures, it is the Greeks who have preserved some of the most compelling portraits of the goddess. Mere mention of the names Aphrodite, Medea, Scylla, Hecate, Ariadne, and Athena is enough to evoke images of archetypal significance. Each of these figures represents, as it were, a face from the ancient gallery of the mother goddess, offering respectively a portrait of the goddess as Queen of Heaven, sorceress, harpy, witch, captive maiden, and warrior.

At first glance, the aforementioned figures would appear to have little in common. Indeed, it is the extraordinary diversity in the goddess' various manifestations which militates against the prospect that a common denominator can be found which will satisfactorily define them. Such diversity notwithstanding, there have been various attempts to explain the goddess' cult via a common denominator, different scholars viewing the goddess as a personification of the Moon,<sup>4</sup> the earth,<sup>5</sup> the unconscious,<sup>6</sup> etc. Yet none of these theories has gained general acceptance, primarily because none can account for more than a select handful of the goddess' numerous functions and attributes.

In our opinion, it is the goddess' identification with the planet Venus which offers the elusive common denominator necessary to achieve a comprehensive understanding of her cult. In this chapter we intend to show that certain important symbolic images and mythological themes associated with the goddess have their origin in ancient conceptions associated with the planet Venus.

If indeed the cult of the mother goddess traces to the ancients' experience of the planet Venus—its appearance, behavior, and participation in a series of spectacular cataclysms—the possibility presents itself that the various faces of the goddess reflect significant phases or episodes in that planet's history. It is demonstrable, for example, that Venus experienced a series of metamorphoses in appearance during that period of its history witnessed by ancient man, including several changes in color and shape, as well as significant mutations in its orbit and the shape of its atmosphere. Insofar as the respective phases in the evolutionary history of Venus can be delineated and reconstructed, they can be shown to be responsible for the origin and development of specific archetypal mythical images of the goddess.

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3. R. Graves, *op. cit.*, p. 482.

4. *Ibid.*

5. R. Briffault, *op. cit.*

6. E. Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton, 1974), p. 6.

## APHRODITE URANIA

Even today, Aphrodite's name elicits images of alluring beauty, sensuality, and passion. The goddess is best known, perhaps, as a divine matchmaker and agent *provocateur* of sensual desire and infatuation, whose magical charms were enough to entice even the gods into acts of lust and illicit love. In the *Iliad*, for example, Aphrodite's zone is said to arouse immediate desire in the eyes of its beholder.<sup>7</sup> As Burkert points out, verbs formed from the goddess' name denote the act of love, a tendency found already in Homer.<sup>8</sup>

Aphrodite is famous for her liaisons with various heroes and gods. Her adulterous dalliance with Ares was the source of much amusement to the gods of Olympus and was likely a subject in ancient cult as well.<sup>9</sup> Tragedy, rather than comedy, marked Aphrodite's torrid love affair with Adonis. According to one version of the myth, the goddess is said to have leapt off the Leucadian rock out of grief for the beautiful youth.<sup>10</sup> Her romance with Anchises, finally, is one of the most ancient traditions surrounding the goddess.<sup>11</sup> Gantz summarizes Aphrodite's role in myth as follows: "Aside from Homer and these (relatively few) amatory encounters, Aphrodite's role in myth is limited to isolated instances of aiding lovers or punishing those who reject love."<sup>12</sup>

As to the antiquity of Aphrodite's cult in ancient Greece, there is some debate. While the goddess is already securely established in the earliest epic literature, her name is absent from the Mycenaean religion as attested in the Linear B tablets. Most probably the cult of the goddess came to Greece in the period between 1200 BCE and 800.<sup>13</sup> Burkert, upon surveying the evidence, confesses: "Aphrodite's origin remains as obscure as her name."<sup>14</sup>

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7. *Iliad* 14:216.

8. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 152, citing *Odyssey* 22:444.

9. *Odyssey* 8:266-364.

10. See the discussion in L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. II (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 650.

11. *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 53ff.

12. T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore, 1993), p. 104.

13. C. Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia* (London, 1994), pp. 176ff.

14. W. Burkert, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

Whence, then, did Aphrodite arrive on Greek shores? For Homer, Hesiod, and other early writers, the goddess was intimately linked to Cyprus. The *Odyssey* lists Paphos as the goddess' homeland, while the *Iliad* makes Kypriis her most common epithet.<sup>15</sup> Hesiod calls her both Kyprogene and Kythereia.

Our search for Aphrodite's origins does not stop in Cyprus, a well known melting pot of Oriental religious conceptions. Among leading scholars, there is something of a consensus that the cult of Aphrodite originally came to Greece from the ancient Near East. Thus, Nagy observes: "Behind the figure of Aphrodite there clearly stands the ancient Semitic goddess of love, Ishtar-Astarte, divine consort of the king, queen of heaven, and hetaera in one."<sup>16</sup> This view receives strong support from the Greeks themselves. Pausanias, for example, offered the following opinion: "The Assyrians were the first of the human race to worship the heavenly one [Aphrodite Urania]; then the people of Paphos in Cyprus, and of Phoenician Askalon in Palestine, and the people of Kythera, who learnt her worship from the Phoenicians."<sup>17</sup>

Burkert points out that Aphrodite shared numerous characteristics in common with Ishtar. Both are depicted as goddesses of love and associated with rites of prostitution, for example.<sup>18</sup> Aphrodite, like Ishtar, was represented as armed and invoked to guarantee victory.

In his comprehensive survey of Aphrodite's cult, Burkert never once mentions the planet Venus. Here the renowned scholar is presumably following the prevailing view, which does not recognize an early connection between the goddess and the planet.<sup>19</sup> It is only with the adoption of Babylonian planetary religion in the fifth

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15. *Ibid.*, p. 153. According to C. Penglase, *op. cit.*, p. 176, "The earliest evidence for Aphrodite in the Greek and Mycenaean area is the temple in Paphos."

16. W. Burkert, *op. cit.*, p. 152. Burkert elsewhere suggests that the goddess' name derives from that of Ashtorith: "It is possible that the name Aphrodite itself is a Greek form of western Semitic Ashtorith, who in turn is identical with Ishtar." See *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 98. C. Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks* (London, 1981), p. 67 had previously anticipated this possibility.

17. Book I:14:7.

18. C. Penglase, *op. cit.*, p. 163, citing Strabo 378 for Corinthian cults of prostitution associated with Aphrodite. Notice also the epithet *Porne*.

19. W. Heimpel, "A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities," *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4:3 (1982), p. 22, writes that "Originally, Aphrodite was not connected with Venus."

century BCE, according to this view, that Aphrodite became identified with Venus (In the Greek sources themselves, Plato—or Philip of Opus—is our earliest authority for this identification.)<sup>20</sup> Inasmuch as we have reason to question this judgment, a reexamination of the evidence is in order.

An important clue is provided by Aphrodite's epithet Urania. As Farnell points out,<sup>21</sup> Urania—"the celestial one"—was a Greek translation of the Semitic title *malkat ha-šamayim*, "the queen of the heavens," long understood as having reference to Venus.<sup>22</sup> Yet Farnell questions whether Aphrodite's epithet betrays an astral component! Such an opinion ignores the plain fact that this epithet finds precise parallels in the cults of other Venus-goddesses throughout the ancient world. Thus, a Sumerian hymn invokes Inanna as follows:

"To the great Queen of Heaven, Inanna, I want to address my greeting. To her who fills the sky with her pure blaze, to the luminous one, to Inanna, as bright as the sun..."<sup>23</sup>

The Akkadian Ishtar shares the same epithet. Thus, one hymn invokes Ishtar as follows:

"Her very first name, her great appellation which her father Anu, whom she adores, named her of old, is Ninanna 'Queen of Heaven', Mistress of the inhabited world...companion to the sun, fierce in terror."<sup>24</sup>

How is it possible to understand these early hymns to Inanna and Ishtar apart from reference to a celestial body? In complete agreement with the religious literature, Babylonian astronomical tablets include the Sumerian phrase *d<sup>ni</sup>n.dar.an.na*, "the bright, or vari-coloured, queen of heavens" among the various names for the planet Venus.<sup>25</sup>

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20. *Epinomis* 986e-987a. Note that this work is generally believed to have been written by Philip of Opus.

21. L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 629.

22. See L. Bobrova & A. Militarev, "From Mesopotamia to Greece: to the Origin of Semitic and Greek Star Names," ed. by H. Galter, *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), p. 315.

23. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 105.

24. B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, Vol. 1 (Bethesda, 1993), p. 503.

The planetary goddess figures prominently among the pagan gods mentioned in the Old Testament, and doubtless there was much truth in Jeremiah's admission<sup>26</sup> that the pre-exilic Jews had long offered cakes to the Queen of Heaven.<sup>27</sup> Since Jeremiah does not name the goddess in question, scholars have been forced to deduce her identity. Some scholars have favored Anat as the intended target of Jeremiah's polemics, and indeed that goddess was invoked as the Queen of Heaven in Egyptian sources.<sup>28</sup> Others have favored Astarte as the most likely candidate.<sup>29</sup> Astarte's identification with the planet Venus is commonly acknowledged,<sup>30</sup> as is her affinity with Aphrodite. Indeed, a late inscription, *circa* 160 BC, identifies the two goddesses.<sup>31</sup>

Given this evidence, there seems to be little justification for Farnell's view that Aphrodite's epithet *Urania* did not have an astral component.

### Aphrodite and Ares

If the cult of Aphrodite reflects ancient conceptions associated with the planet Venus, it must be expected that celestial goings on will help explain specific details in the goddess' mythical career. Aphrodite's notorious affair with Ares, described in the 8th chapter of the *Odyssey* and alluded to in Aeschylus' "The Suppliants," is a case in point.<sup>32</sup> Certainly it is an interesting "coincidence" that the goddess was linked in love with the very god identified with the planet Mars in Greek tradition, thereby paralleling the testimony of the Pawnee, who spoke of a "marriage" between Mars and Venus.

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25. F. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 35. See also L. Bobrova & A. Militarev, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

26. *Jeremiah* 44:17-25.

27. M. Weinfeld, "The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and its Background," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 4 (1972), p. 150.

28. K. van der Toorn, "Goddesses in Early Israelite Religion," in L. Goodison & C. Morris eds., *Ancient Goddesses* (London, 1998), pp. 85-86. For a similar opinion, see R. Patai, "The Goddess Asherah," *JNES* 24 (1965), p. 38.

29. G. Widengren, "Early Hebrew Myths and Their Interpretation," in S. Hooke ed., *Myth and Ritual* (London, 1933), p. 183. See also W. Heimpel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

30. J. Henninger, "Zum Problem der Venussterngottheit bei den Semiten," *Anthropos* 71 (1976), pp. 153ff.

31. W. Heimpel, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

32. *The Suppliants*, 659ff makes reference to "Ares Manslayer, who beds Aphrodite."

Although it is difficult to recognize any reference to planets in Homer's account, wherein Aphrodite and Ares have been euhemerized to the point of low comedy, some early commentators pointed to a conjunction of planets as providing the original inspiration for the blind bard's bawdy tale. Lucian, writing in the second century AD for an Athenian audience, offered the following commentary on the *Odyssey*:

"All that he [Homer] hath said of Venus and of Mars his passion, is also manifestly composed from no other source than this science [astrology]. Indeed, it is the conjunction of Venus and Mars that creates the poetry of Homer."<sup>33</sup>

## STAR OF LAMENTATION

Celestial determinants also inform Aphrodite's role as a lamenting goddess. This motif is most obvious in the traditions surrounding Adonis, a god whose rituals featured ceremonial wailing and the singing of dirges.<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, Aphrodite is said to have leapt from the rocks of Leukas in anguish over Adonis' death. Gregory Nagy, one of the foremost scholars of Greek myth, would explain Aphrodite's leap in terms of Venus' stereotypical movements in the sky: "By diving from the White Rock, she [Sappho] does what Aphrodite does in the form of Evening Star, diving after the sunken Sun in order to retrieve him the next morning in the form of Morning Star."<sup>35</sup>

That Aphrodite's tragic leap and lamentations have some reference to Venus receives support from Babylon, where Ishtar/Venus was known as the "star of lamentation."<sup>36</sup> This is indeed a puzzling epithet: What possible relation could there be between a distant planet and ancient mourning rites?

33. *On Astrology*, 22. See here the discussion in I. Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1950), pp. 257-258.

34. L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 637, adds: "We meet also with ceremonies of mourning and sadness in the worship of Leucothea at Thebes, and perhaps in Crete, as we find them elsewhere in the worship of Aphrodite."

35. G. Nagy, "The White Rock of Leukas," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973), p. 175.

36. F. Stephens, "Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar," in J. Pritchard ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, 1969), p. 384. Venus was known as the "star of wailing" in Babylonian astronomical texts. See E. Reiner & D. Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens: Part 3* (Groningen, 1998), p. 155.

A survey of ancient Venus-goddesses will reveal that many were represented as great mourners. Inanna's lamentations in the wake of Dumuzi's death, as we will see, are said to have shaken the foundations of heaven. In Canaanite tradition, Anat's lamentations on behalf of Baal were much celebrated in ancient cult and literature.<sup>37</sup> Witness the following passage:

"Then Anat went to and fro and scoured every mountain to the heart of the earth...She came upon Baal, fallen to earth. She covered her loins with sack-cloth;...she scraped (her) skin with a stone...She gashed her cheeks and chin."<sup>38</sup>

In Egyptian tradition, Isis is said to have wandered the world looking for the remains of Osiris: "She sought him without wearying; full of mourning she traversed the land, and took no rest until she found him."<sup>39</sup>

Similar traditions surround the goddess Freyja, long recognized as a Norse counterpart to the Latin goddess Venus. As Briffault recognized many years ago, Freyja's lamentations conform to a universal archetype:

"Freyja was expressly a wanderer. Like Isis in search of Osiris, like Io and innumerable other goddesses, she wanders disconsolate in search of Odhr, or Odin."<sup>40</sup>

The lamenting goddess is also attested in the New World: there the Chichimec goddess Itzpapalotl is said to have "wandered off—combing her hair, painting her face, and lamenting the loss of Arrow Fish."<sup>41</sup>

The Phrygian Cybele offers a classic example of the mourning goddess. According to Diodorus, the goddess wandered the world with disheveled hair while lamenting the death of Attis.<sup>42</sup> Significantly, Cybele was identified with Aphrodite.<sup>43</sup>

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37. N. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Cult* (Atlanta, 1992), p. 67.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

39. A. Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London, 1907), p. 33.

40. R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1927), p. 66.

41. B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, 1983), p. 171.

42. *Library* 3:59:1-2.

43. L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 633, 641.

There is ample reason for thinking that Diodorus' account preserves archetypal motifs of profound significance, as the mourning goddess' penchant for wandering around with flowing hair forms a recurring feature in ancient myth. The Greek Electra, for example, is said to have unbound her hair and streamed across heaven as a comet while lamenting the destruction of Troy. Hyginus recounts Electra's plight as follows:

"But after the conquest of Troy and the annihilation of its descendants,...overwhelmed by pain she separated from her sisters and settled in the circle named arctic, and over long periods she would be seen lamenting, her hair streaming. That brought her the name of comet."<sup>44</sup>

In the account of Bion of Smyrna, a poet of the late second century BC, Aphrodite herself is said to have loosened her hair and embarked upon a period of wandering in the wake of Adonis' death:

"And Aphrodite unbinds her locks and goes wandering through the woodlands, distraught, unkempt, and barefoot. The thorns tear her as she goes, and gather her holy blood, but she sweeps through the long glades, shrieking aloud and calling on the lad, her Assyrian lord."<sup>45</sup>

It is our opinion that Hyginus' description of Electra offers the decisive clue for understanding these ancient traditions of lamenting goddesses—the goddess' lamentations occurred in the sky and had reference to a comet-like apparition. Although the connection between the goddess' lamentations and cometary phenomena has seldom survived the passage of time, it is deducible from the context and pattern characteristic of the lamenting goddess motif. In the Sumerian hymn "Dumuzi's Dream," for example, Dumuzi's sister Geshtinanna announces while lamenting his death that "my hair will whirl in heaven for you."<sup>46</sup> That this image had reference to something actually seen in the sky is supported by a subsequent passage in the same hymn, wherein her "cries" are given concrete form:

"Geshtinanna cried toward heaven, cried toward earth. (Her) cries covered the horizon completely like a cloth and were spread out like linen."<sup>47</sup>

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44. *De Astronomia*, as translated by Milad Doueihi in C. Sagan & A. Druryan, *Comet* (New York, 1985), p. 18.


45. *The Lament for Adonis* I:19-21.

46. B. Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream* (Copenhagen, 1972), p. 61.



The cometary form of the planetary goddess left a trace in ancient ritual as well. Thus, various early Christian authors described a Phoenician ritual at Aphaca associated with Astarte in which the goddess was represented as a falling star.<sup>48</sup> Astour summarized this ritual as follows: "It was believed that once a year the goddess descended into the pool as a fiery falling star, or that on solemn feast days, when people assembled in the shrine, a fire-globe was lit in the vicinity of the temple and probably rolled into the pool."<sup>49</sup>

It will be remembered that Astarte was identified with Aphrodite, as Philo reports: "The Phoenicians say that Astarte is Aphrodite."<sup>50</sup>

As the "star of lamentation" was deemed to be of female form, we find that mourning rites were typically considered the special province of females. On this aspect of ancient religion, Briffault offered the following observation: "Those rites and 'lamentations' are throughout the primitive society performed by women."<sup>51</sup> It is significant to note that mourning rites around the globe feature women whose hair is purposefully loosened in order to appear streaming and disheveled. Arab mourners, for example, are described as follows by one scholar: "Then our women bewail (the dead) with voices, hoarse with weeping...with disheveled hair."<sup>52</sup> In the *Mahabharata*, women wearing their hair loose is a sign of mourning.<sup>53</sup> Ancient Egyptian monuments likewise show female mourners with disheveled hair.<sup>54</sup> Given this practice and the general belief that disheveled hair was a token of mourning, it is doubtless for good reason that various words for "mourning" in the Egyptian hieroglyphic language have the hair-sign as a determinative—.<sup>55</sup>

47. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

48. See here the discussion in J. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (New York, 1961), p. 259, citing Sozomenos, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II:5; Zosimos, *Histories* I:58.

49. M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 115-116.

50. Fragment 2, D32. See here H. Attridge & R. Oden, "Philo of Byblos: The Phoenician History," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 9 (1981), p. 55.

51. R. Briffault, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

52. A. Wensinck, *Some Semitic Rites of Mourning and Religion: Studies on Their Origin and Mutual Relation* (Amsterdam, 1917), p. 50.

53. 2.71.18-20.

54. In a death scene from a tomb at Saqqara, for example. See the discussion in A. Burton, *Diodorus Siculus: Book One, A Commentary* (Leiden, 1972), pp. 211, 261.

55. W. W. "Trauer," in *LÄ* 5 (Berlin, 1977), p. 744.

The same visual effect could be produced by tearing at the hair or by leaving it uncombed or otherwise uncared for. Women upon the islands of Leti, Moa, and Lakor are expressly forbidden from combing their hair during the period of mourning, in order to appear all the more disheveled.<sup>56</sup> At the same time they dress in old, black clothes.

Similar practices prevailed in ancient Greece: "In Greece, as elsewhere, the dirge was sung and accompanied with an ecstatic dance in which women beat their breasts and tore their hair."<sup>57</sup> But this is precisely how Inanna/Venus was said to have behaved while in the midst of her lamentations. Witness the following hymn:

"She cries bitter tears. She destroys her breasts (as if beating) a drum. She cries bitter tears. She pulls out her hair (like) reeds. She cries bitter tears."<sup>58</sup>

It is our opinion that such ritualistic practices have their origin in dramatic celestial events—specifically, a comet-like apparition associated with the mother goddess. This possibility prompts the following question: If the Queen of Heaven is to be identified with the planet Venus, as we have argued, why would ancient peoples describe her with cometary attributes? A satisfactory answer to this question is essential for a proper understanding of the goddess' cult, to say nothing of a proper understanding of the recent history of the solar system.

## APHRODITE AREIA

In Sparta, as elsewhere in ancient Greece, Aphrodite was invoked as a warrior as attested by the epithet *Areia*. This cult was considered strange by the Greeks themselves, as Graf has pointed out: "The armed Aphrodite of Sparta challenged the wits of Hellenistic epigrammists and Roman students of rhetoric: for both, she was a puzzling paradox."<sup>59</sup> Yet the Spartan cult finds a close parallel on the island of Cythera, where Aphrodite *Urania* was represented as armed. And this cult, it will be remembered, was esteemed the oldest cult of the goddess. Farnell's opinion here

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56. A. Wensinck, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

57. R. Willetts, *Cretan Cults and Festivals* (New York, 1962), p. 189.

58. M. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma* (Cincinnati, 1981), p. 65.

59. F. Graz, "Women, War, and Warlike Divinities," in W. Eck et al. eds., *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 55 (1984), p. 250.

seems perfectly well-founded: "We may believe that the cult of the armed Aphrodite belongs to the first period of her worship in Greece."<sup>60</sup>

How, then, are we to understand Aphrodite's role as a warrior?<sup>61</sup> The Greek evidence itself is of little help here, being relatively scarce, due in no small part to the fact that by the time of our earliest testimony the goddess had become "civilized" and more than a little specialized as well. As Harrison pointed out long ago, there is a marked tendency in Greek myth for originally multifaceted goddesses to become compartmentalized through time. Such a specialization in function appears to have occurred in the case of Aphrodite:

"Another note of her late coming into Greece proper is that she is in Homer a departmental goddess, having for her sphere one human passion. The earlier forms of divinities are of larger import, they tend to be gods of all work. When the fusion of tribes and the influence of literature conjointly bring together a number of local divinities, perforce, if they are to hold together, they divide functions and attributes, i.e., become departmental."<sup>62</sup>

In seeking to understand Aphrodite's warrior-aspect, comparative mythology is our surest guide. As we have documented elsewhere, the warrior-goddess is intimately related to the lamenting goddess. If, in one text, Inanna is described as a great warrior whose "raging" threatens to destroy heaven and earth, another text describes her as a grieving mourner whose lamentations shake the foundations of the world:

"She of lament, she of lament, struck up a lament. The hierodule, she of lament, she of lament struck up a lament. The hierodule of heaven, Inanna, the devastatrix of the mountain, the lady of Hursagkalama, she who causes the heavens to rumble, the lady of the Eturkalama, she who shakes the earth...she of lament, she of lament (struck up a lament)."<sup>63</sup>

Inanna's celestial war-mongering, in fact, is expressly attributed to her "troubled heart" and otherworldly dirge:

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60. L. Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 653.

61. For a recent survey of the evidence, see J. Flemberg, *Venus Armata* (Stockholm, 1991).

62. J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New York, 1975), p. 308.

63. M. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma* (Cincinnati, 1981), p. 148.

"You make the heavens tremble and the earth quake. Great Priestess, who can soothe your troubled heart? You flash like lightning over the highlands; you throw your firebrands across the earth. Your deafening command...splits apart great mountains."<sup>64</sup>

The same idea is apparent in the following passage:

"Devastatrix of the lands, you are lent wings by the storm...you fly about the nation. At the sound of you the lands bow down. Propelled on your own wings you peck away at the land. With a roaring storm you roar; with Thunder you continually thunder...To (the accompaniment of) the harp of sighs you give vent to a dirge."<sup>65</sup>

Why Inanna would be represented as a raging warrior-goddess has received scant attention from scholars. Jacobsen, in a discussion of the goddess' warrior aspect, remarks: "In the process of humanization, gods of rain and thunderstorms tended...to be envisaged as warriors riding their chariots into battle."<sup>66</sup> Why this should be the case is not addressed and, in any case, is far from obvious.

Others have suggested that Inanna's warlike nature traces to her association with the rites of kingship: "Her function as a bestower of kingship and protectress of the city-state of Uruk may have given rise to her warlike character, since kingship followed the fortune of arms."<sup>67</sup> Another leading scholar offered the following explanation of Ishtar's warrior-aspect: "Since in early nomadic society the young women egged on the young warriors in battle with praise and taunts, she could also be seen as the personification of the rage of battle."<sup>68</sup>

The superficial and ad hoc nature of such hypotheses is readily apparent: Not only is the specific imagery surrounding the goddess' warring rampage ignored so, too, is its celestial context. The possibility that Inanna's warrior-aspect might have some reference to the behavior of the planet Venus is never considered. Yet the fact

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64. D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *Inanna* (New York, 1983), p. 95.

65. W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), pp. 17-19.

66. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 137.

67. J. Westenholz, "Goddesses of the Ancient Near East 3000-1000 BC," in L. Goodison & C. Morris eds., *Ancient Goddesses* (London, 1998), p. 73.

68. J. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon* (Baltimore, 1972), p. 40.

is that Inanna was explicitly identified with the planet Venus *as well* as a warrior already at the dawn of history.<sup>69</sup>

That scholars have been inclined to divorce the goddess' warrior-aspect from the planet Venus stands to reason, for what could such imagery have to do with the planet known to modern astronomers, which typically displays a beautiful, tranquil appearance and never rages, storms, laments, wars, or otherwise presents a threatening persona? Indeed, it is the striking incongruity between Inanna's dual appearance as Venus and as a warrior which has led scholars to speak of a "coalescence" of originally independent cults under the name of Inanna.<sup>70</sup>

Incongruous or not, goddesses everywhere are represented as prolific and blood-thirsty warriors. The traditions surrounding Ishtar are exemplary here. The destruction wrought by the planet-goddess knew no bounds, extending to the sacred domain of the gods as well:

"O splendid lioness of the Igigi-gods, who renders furious gods submissive...great is your valor, O valiant Ishtar, Shining torch of heaven and earth, brilliance of all inhabited lands. Furious in irresistible onslaught, hero to the fight, Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce, Dancing one, Ish-tar...Irninitum, raging lion, may your heart be calmed."<sup>71</sup>

Other hymns confirm that it was the Ishtar's cries which shook the world:

"I rain battle down like flames in the fighting, I make heaven and earth shake (?) with my cries, ...I, Ishtar, am queen of heaven and earth. I am the queen...I constantly traverse heaven, then (?) I trample the earth, I destroy what remains of the inhabited world."<sup>72</sup>

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69. D. O. Edzard, "Mesopotamien: Die Mythologie der Sumerer und Akkader," in H. Hausig ed., *Wörterbuch der Mythologie* (Stuttgart, 1962), p. 85 notes that the astral aspect of Inanna/Ishtar is frequently expressed together with the warlike aspect of the goddess. See also the discussion in H. Balz-Cochois, *Inanna* (Gütersloh, 1992), p. 46.

70. T. Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

71. B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, Vol. 1 (Bethesda, 1993), p. 512.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

In addition to Inanna, Ishtar, and Aphrodite, Hathor, Anat,<sup>73</sup> Astarte,<sup>74</sup> and Freyja<sup>75</sup> are all represented as warriors. The same motif is prominent in the New World as well, as we will discover.

## Kali

Ancient India offers several notable examples of the warrior-goddess, the most interesting of which is Durga-Kali, who mirrors Ishtar in various respects. The following description of the Hindu goddess is typical:

"Her anger grew so terrible that she transformed herself, grew smaller and black and left her lion mount and starting walking on foot. Her name then became Kali. With tongue lolling and dripping with blood, she then went on a blind destructive rampage, killing everything and everyone in sight, regardless of who they were."<sup>76</sup>

Although Kali is occasionally described as beautiful, it is more common to find her presented as repulsive in appearance, with horribly disheveled hair and protruding tongue:

"Hindu texts referring to the goddess are nearly unanimous in describing her as terrible in appearance and as offensive and destructive in her habits. Her hair is disheveled, her eyes red and fierce, she has fangs and a long lolling tongue, her lips are often smeared with blood, her breasts are long and pendulous, her stomach is sunken, and her figure is generally gaunt. She is naked but for several characteristic ornaments: a necklace of skulls or freshly cut heads, a girdle of severed arms, and infant corpses as earrings."<sup>77</sup>

Kali is intimately associated with Shiva, with whom she participates in a frenzied dance of apocalyptic import. Indeed, some hymns make the goddess dance upon the prostrate body of Shiva:

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73. See the discussion in A. Eaton, *The Goddess Anat: The History of Her Cult, Her Mythology and Her Iconography* (New Haven, 1969), pp. 54-78.

74. J. Westenholz, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

75. *Gylfaginning* 23. See also G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), p. 177.

76. J. Kripal, "Kali's Tongue and Ramakrishna," *History of Religions* 34:2 (1994), p. 161.

77. D. Kinsley, "Blood and Death Out of Place: Reflections on the Goddess Kali," in J. Hawley and D. Wulff eds., *The Divine Consort* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 144-145.

"Ever art you dancing in battle, Mother. Never was beauty like thine, as with thy hair flowing about thee, thou dost ever dance, a naked warrior on the breast of Shiva."<sup>78</sup>

The image of the warrior-goddess dancing in ecstasy amidst blood and gore is also apparent in Babylonian tradition, where battle was described as the "dance" of Ishtar.<sup>79</sup> Like Kali, Ishtar is described as dancing while in the throes of combat:

"Shining torch of heaven and earth, brilliance of all inhabited lands. Furious in irresistible onslaught, hero to the fight, fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce, Dancing one, Ishtar."<sup>80</sup>

Given the obvious parallels between the two goddesses, it is significant to note that Kali's dancing, like Ishtar's, is said to have threatened the foundations of the world:

"The dread mother dances naked in the battlefield, Her lolling tongue burns like a red flame of fire, Her dark tresses, fly in the sky, sweeping away sun and stars, Red streams of blood run from her cloud-black limbs, And the world trembles and cracks under her tread."<sup>81</sup>

As this last passage indicates, Kali's disheveled hair was explicitly linked to a terrifying disaster involving the obscuration of the sun. Indeed, an epithet of the goddess referred to her as "terrible night of destruction."<sup>82</sup> Hildebeitel, with reference to a similar episode in the mythic career of the analogous goddess Draupadi, observes that the goddess' "disheveled hair is thus itself an image of Kalaratri, the Night of Time, the night of the dissolution (*pralaya*) of the universe."<sup>83</sup>

In Hindu lore there is a recurring emphasis on the disheveled hair of Kali. An epithet of the warrior goddess—*Muktakesi*—commemorates her loosened and disheveled hair.<sup>84</sup> When it is reported that Kali's "streaming tresses hang in vast

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78. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

79. T. Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

80. The "Great Prayer to Ishtar," as translated by B. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 512.

81. R. Tagore, *Sacrifice and Other Plays* (Bombay, 1917), p. 109.

82. D. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 87.

83. A. Hildebeitel, "Draupadi's Hair," in M. Biarreau ed., *Autour de la déesse Hindoue* (Paris, 1981), p. 207.

disorder,"<sup>85</sup> or that her disheveled hair blackens the skies, "sweeping away sun and stars," is it not obvious that the imagery of the comet is once more upon us? In ancient times, it will be remembered, the appearance of a *comet* was said to herald the end of the world and a period of oppressive darkness. Witness the following entry under "comet" from a standard dictionary of myth and symbolism:

"Evil omen. Believed to bring or portend war, the downfall of kings, earthquakes, end of the world, famine, plague, universal darkness."<sup>86</sup>

Grotesque as it is, Kali's monstrous form can be shown to have striking parallels throughout the ancient world. Consider the example provided by the Aztec mourning goddess Itzpapalotl, who was commonly represented as a warrior:

"Obsidian Knife Butterfly is a wholly Chichimec goddess and her only office was war. She is depicted with a defleshed face and talons for feet and hands; she is winged and is often shown sweeping down from the heavens like a ghastly *tzitzimilitl*. We are not shocked to see her in this form, but it comes as something of a shock to see her also cast in mythology as a double of Precious Flower [i.e., Xochiquetzal, the Aztec Aphrodite]...This is an outstanding example of the interpenetrability of the forms of the Great Mother."<sup>87</sup>

The comparison of the mourning goddess to a Tzitzimilitl is most revealing for the latter "is an eerie goddess in the night sky...[whose] hair is madly disheveled."<sup>88</sup> A picture of a Tzitzimilitl is shown in figure one. In addition to the protruding tongue, the Aztec goddess is distinguished by a necklace of hearts and hands. The resemblance to Kali is striking and apparent at once.

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84. See J. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* (London, 1961), p. 87.

85. D. Kinsley, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

86. G. Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York, 1961/2), p. 360.

87. B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, 1983), p. 173.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 62.





Figure one

In Aztec myth, Itzpapalotl was said to have been thrown from heaven for sinning against the gods.<sup>89</sup> This tradition finds a remarkable parallel in ancient Babylon, where Lamashtu—an avatar of Inanna/Ishtar —was hurled from heaven for her evil deeds.<sup>90</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge described the Babylonian goddess as follows:

“Among all the devils and fiends of which the Mesopotamians lived in terror, the one that seems to have been the most dreaded was [Lamashtu], a she-devil, and the daughter of the great god Anu...The goddess Lamashtu was a violent, raging devil of terrifying aspect...With her hair tossed about wildly, and her breasts uncovered she burst out of the cane brakes like a whirlwind...”<sup>91</sup>

It was upon being thrown from heaven that Lamashtu was said to have displayed wildly disheveled hair. An Assyrian incantation alludes to this theme:

“She is a haunt, she is malicious, Offspring of a god, daughter of Anu. For her malevolent will, her base counsel, Anu her father dashed her down from heaven to earth, For her malevolent will, her inflammatory counsel. Her hair is askew, her loincloth is torn away.”<sup>92</sup>

89. B. Brundage, *op. cit.*, p. 46, citing the *Codex Vaticanus* plate 43.

90. W. Fauth, “Ištar als Löwingöttin und die löwenköpfige Lamaštu,” *Die Welt des Orients* 12 (1981), pp. 33-34.

91. E. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans* (New York, 1968), pp. 104-109.

The image of Inanna-Lamashtu being hurled from heaven with disheveled hair once again calls to mind cometary imagery, comets having long been compared to women with streaming or disheveled hair.<sup>93</sup> Lamashtu's disheveled hair and tattered clothes, likewise, recall the appearance traditionally associated with mourning women. Even the comparison of the demonic goddess to a "whirlwind" finds a remarkable parallel in the traditions surrounding the mourning goddess, as evidenced by the boast of the Sumerian Geshtinanna, cited earlier: "My hair will whirl around in heaven for you like a hurricane."<sup>94</sup>

The fact that analogous traditions of a warrior-goddess with disheveled hair can be found in both the Old World and New strongly suggests that the imagery originated as a direct result of common experience, presumably being inspired by a particularly memorable comet-like apparition. Yet as the example provided by Inanna-Lamashtu attests, there is also an indissoluble connection with the planet Venus.

Here, too, New World traditions preserve the explicit link to Venus. Thus, the Shipibo of the Amazon Basin tell of the time when Venus fell from heaven like a meteor, a remarkable parallel to the fiery fall of Astarte/Venus, cited earlier.<sup>95</sup> In Inca lore, meanwhile, Venus was known as *chasca coyllur*, or the "star (*coyllur*) with tangled or disheveled hair."<sup>96</sup> The modern descendants of the Inca continue to observe "the day of disheveled hair," presumably because of its cosmological import: "In the Andes, the modern lexicographer Lara has noted a Quechua neologism, *ch'askachau*—literally 'the day of disheveled hair'—meaning *viernes*, the Spanish word for Venus's day."<sup>97</sup>

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92. B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 59.

93. As Carl Sagan remarked in *Comet* (New York, 1985), p. 122, "When we see a picture of a comet some of us are immediately reminded of a woman with long, straight hair being blown back behind her, the reason, as we have said, for the very name comet, derived from the Greek word for hair." See also the discussion in W. Gundel, "Kometen," *RE* 11:1 (1921), col. 1175-1176.

94. Translation in B. Alster, "The Mythology of Mourning," *Acta Sumerologica* 5 (1983), p. 6.

95. Peter Roe, *The Cosmic Zygote: Cosmology in the Amazon Basin* (New Brunswick, 1982), p. 245.

96. W. Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas* (New York, 1996), p. 87, citing Diego Holguin's *Vocabulario de la lengua general de todo el Peru llamada lengua Quichua o del Inca*.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Faced with such widespread and complementary traditions, the conclusion seems inescapable: It was the planet Venus itself, explicitly identified with the mother goddess, which once displayed disheveled hair while participating in a spectacular cataclysm that shook the very foundations of heaven and earth and threatened to forever eclipse the light of the Sun. Alternately described as Inanna's lamentations, Ishtar's battle dance, or Kali's apocalyptic "terrible night of destruction," the different mythical scenarios commemorate a terrifying cataclysm marked by a warrior-goddess gone amok.

## APHRODITE MELAINA

Apparent in the traditions surrounding Kali and Lamashtu is an emphasis upon the goddess' disheveled appearance and black color. Kali's very name, in fact, signifies the "black one." Here, too, it can be shown that the goddess' dark color belongs to the most archaic stratum of myth and likely reflects a singular phase in the recent history of Venus.

In the New World, the Aztecs celebrated the mother goddess Coatlicue, "Serpent Skirt," who was described as "black, dirty, disheveled, and of shocking ugliness."<sup>98</sup> Figure two shows a statue of the goddess in the National Museum of Mexico. Brundage offered the following commentary with regard to this monument:

"The skirt of writhing snakes and the necklace of hands and hearts from which dangles the skull pendant—these form the goddess' accouterments and strike the viewer first. But even more uncompromising is her form, the bared and flaccid breasts, the clutched hands that are really serpent heads, and the great taloned feet whose thumping tread we can almost hear."<sup>99</sup>

It would be difficult to imagine a more striking parallel to the Hindu Kali and Canaanite Anat, both of whom were described as wearing necklaces of severed heads and other assorted body parts.<sup>100</sup>

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98. B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, 1983), p. 166.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

100. Anat is described as adorned with a belt of severed heads and hands.



Figure two

Aphrodite's epithet *Melaina* is of interest here.<sup>101</sup> Signifying "the black one," this name is more than a little incongruous for an Indo-European goddess of love and beauty. Nor, for that matter, does it seem like a fitting epithet for the brilliant planet Venus. Yet there are intriguing hints that Venus once presented a dark form. Witness the following tradition of the Zinacantecans, heirs to the Maya, in which the planet Venus is compared to an ugly black form when sweeping a path for the sun:

"The great star is a Chamula girl...The awful ugly black Chamula, And isn't that star beautiful, It has rays of light."<sup>102</sup>

101. Pausanias 2.2.4, 8.6.5, 9.27.5. The epithet *Skotia*, "dark one," is of similar import.

102. E. Vogt, *Zinacantan* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 317.

Similar conceptions surrounded the planet further north. Thus, the Cherokee and Ofo knew Venus as "the dark Star."<sup>103</sup>

Aphrodite's melanous form, like her warrior-aspect, is most likely a vestige of her one-time role as a terrible goddess, long since suppressed in her popular cult. Be this as it may, both features are consistent with the goddess' original identification with the planet Venus.

To summarize our discussion to this point: A systematic analysis of the world's great goddesses will reveal an underlying and indissoluble connection with the planet Venus. As the mother goddess is commonly regarded as a great warrior, whose whirling dance threatened the very foundations of the world so, too, have various cultures around the world viewed Venus as an agent of war especially linked to apocalyptic disaster. As the mourning goddess is described as wandering the world with disheveled hair so, too, is Venus described in no uncertain terms as the "star of lamentation" and as "the star with disheveled hair." As the mother goddess is hurled from heaven for her "sins" so, too, is Venus said to have been hurled from heaven. And so it is with countless other mythical motifs surrounding the mother goddess.

Considered in isolation and with reference to the current skies, there is no conceivable reason to link the planet Venus with rites of lamentation, war, disheveled "comet-like" hair, or the color black. Such associations would be surprising enough were they confined to one region of the world alone. Yet, as we have seen, they are common to the New World as well as the Old. This fact provides compelling support for the thesis defended here—that spectacular events involving the planet Venus inform and originally inspired the sacred traditions surrounding Aphrodite, Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte, Kali, and a host of other goddesses as well.

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103. J. King & C. Ventura, "A Southeastern Native American Tradition: The Ofo Calendar and Related Sky Lore," *Archaeoastronomy* 14 (1999), pp. 125, 132.

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"From the book of Marcus Varro, entitled *Of the Race of the Roman People*, I cite word for word the following instance: 'A wonderful portent appeared in the sky. Castor writes that in the well-known star Venus, called Vesperugo by Plautus and Hesperus by Homer (who speaks of it as 'most beautiful'), a remarkable portent appeared. The star actually changed its colour, its size, its shape, and its course; a thing which had never happened before, and has never happened again. This happened in the reign of Ogygus, according to the famous mathematicians Adrastus of Cyzicus and Dion of Neapolis.'"<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine

Velikovsky's most controversial claim was that the planet Venus once presented a "comet-like" appearance. As we have seen in the previous chapter, there is a great deal of evidence which can be brought to bear in support of this proposition. In this chapter we will briefly summarize the ancient terminology surrounding comets in order to determine whether or not a consistent link to Venus can be established.

A survey of ancient comet lore reveals a dozen or so terms for these extraterrestrial visitors which recur around the globe, the most common of which are the following: (1) hair star; (2) tailed star; (3) bearded star; (4) torch star; (5) dragon star; and (6) smoking star. Now it is a remarkable fact, first documented by Velikovsky,<sup>2</sup> that the very same terminology was used to describe the planet Venus.

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1. *City of God* 21:8

2. I. Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1950), pp. 173-176.

## "Long-haired stars"

Comets were known as "long-haired stars" throughout the ancient world, the word comet itself deriving from the Greek *kometes*, the "long-haired." The Tshi of Africa, for example, refer to a comet as a "hair star."<sup>3</sup> In the New World as well native peoples likened a comet to a "star with hair," "hairy star," or "maned star," appellations which accord completely with the global language of the comet. Yucatec Maya dictionaries, for example, referred to comets as "maned" stars.<sup>4</sup>

That New World peoples employed virtually identical terminology to describe Venus has been documented in previous chapters. An Inca name for Venus, as we have seen, was *chasca coyllur*, signifying the "star (*coyllur*) with tangled or disheveled hair."<sup>5</sup> The Cuicatec Indians from Central America still describe Venus as "the star like a hairy beast."<sup>6</sup>

Similar ideas are apparent in the Old World. The Latin scholar Varro, in a discussion of the planet Venus, noted that it was called *Iubar* "because it is *iubata* 'maned'."<sup>7</sup> Yet the same word was also used to describe a comet.<sup>8</sup> In an early attempt to rationalize the ancient language surrounding Venus, Varro compares its light to a lion's mane: "The morning-star is called *iubar*, because it has at the top a diffused light, just as a lion has on his head a *iuba* 'mane.'"<sup>9</sup>

Varro's discussion is intriguing inasmuch as other cultures also compared the planet Venus to a lion. In Sumerian literature, for example, the planet-goddess Inanna was described as the "lion who shines in the sky."<sup>10</sup>

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3. S. Lagercrantz, "Traditional Beliefs in Africa Concerning Meteors, Comets, and Shooting Stars," in *Festschrift für Ad. Jensen* (Munich, 1964), p. 322.

4. W. Lamb, "Star Lore in the Yucatec Maya Dictionaries," in R. Williamson ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the Americas* (Los Altos, 1981), p. 237.

5. W. Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas* (New York, 1996), p. 87, citing Diego Holguín's *Vocabulario de la lengua general de todo el Peru llamada lengua Quichua o del Inca*.

6. E. Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird* (Ithaca, 1977), p. 141.

7. *De lingua latina* VI:6. See here J. Sammer, "An Ancient Latin Name for Venus," *Kronos* 6:2 (Winter 1981), p. 61.

8. Pliny, *Natural History* 2:90 reads: "Up to now it has happened once that a comet in the form of a mane [*iubae*] has changed into one in the form of a spear." See also R. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 164-166.

9. M. Varro, *op. cit.*, 7:76.

Lions are also conspicuous in the sacred iconography surrounding Venusian goddesses.<sup>11</sup> In the ancient Near East, a popular motif finds lions being marked with a "hair-star" on their bodies (see figure one). Upon finding such designs upon lions associated with the cult of Ishtar, various authorities offered the suggestion, still controversial, that the design "was a token of possession marking...animals [with it] as the property of Ishtar."<sup>12</sup>

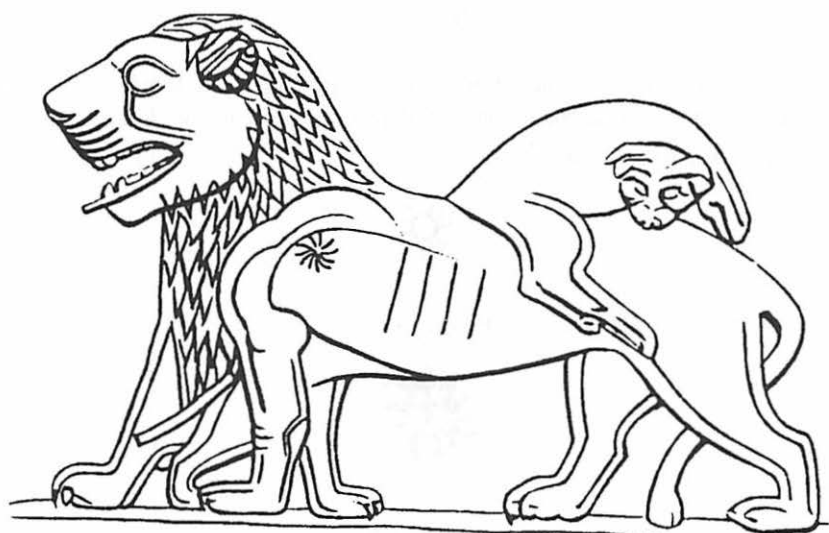


Figure one

In this connection, it is interesting to note that the sacred iconography of various cultures represent Venus as a "hair-star." Thus, an Inca painting shows Chasca/

10. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 150.
11. I. Cornelius, "The Lion in the Art of the Ancient Near East: A Study of Selected Motifs," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* XV (1989), pp. 59-63.
12. E. van Buren, "An Additional Note on the Hair-Whirl," *JNES* 9 (1950), p. 55. Some scholars have expressed doubt that the symbol was connected to Ishtar, but the fact that rosettes and 8-pointed stars are also placed on leonine shoulders—both of which are sacred to Ishtar—would appear to dispel such doubts. Rightly understood, the rosette, 8-pointed star, and "hair-star" each alike serve to symbolize the planet associated with the great goddess.



Venus as an orb with “hair-like” filaments radiating in all directions (see figure two).<sup>13</sup> This conforms exactly with the Inca’s description of Venus as the star with “shaggy” or “disheveled” hair.

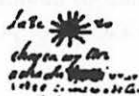


Figure two

Illustrations of Venus from Chile offer a similar form (see figure three).<sup>14</sup> The Chilean image, in turn, bears comparison with depictions of Venus on Siberian shaman’s drums (see figure four).<sup>15</sup>



Figure three.



Figure four

Most significant, however, is the fact that Ishtar’s star was occasionally depicted as “hairy” or “bushy,” as on the cylinder seal shown in figure five.<sup>16</sup>



Figure five

13. Adapted from E. Krupp, “Phases of Venus,” *Griffith Observer* 56:12 (1992), p. 14.

14. Adapted from *Ibid.*, p. 15.

15. Adapted from *Ibid.*, p. 16.

16. Adapted from Figure 317b in O. Keel & C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God* (Minneapolis, 1998).

## **"Tailed stars"**

That comets were called "tailed" stars by numerous cultures is well-documented.<sup>17</sup> Such was the case among Germanic peoples, according to Grimm.<sup>18</sup> Comets were known as *fetia ave*, or "stars with tails," among the Polynesian Islanders.<sup>19</sup> The Tewa Indians of the Rio Grande called comets "tailed stars."<sup>20</sup> The Pomeroun Arawaks of South America describe a comet as a "star with tail."<sup>21</sup> Among the Maya, a comet was known as *uhe 4humil*, "star's tail."<sup>22</sup> The same idea is widespread throughout Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Yet Venus was also described as a "tailed star." Recall the Yakut legend, quoted earlier:

"It [*Solbon*, the planet Venus] is said to be 'the daughter of the Devil and to have had a tail in the early days.' If it approaches the earth, it means destruction, storm, and frost, even in the summer; 'Saint Leontius, however, blessed her and thus her tail disappeared.'"<sup>24</sup>

## **"Bearded stars"**

The designation of comets as "bearded stars" goes back at least to Aristotle and continued well into modern times.<sup>25</sup> In light of this widespread terminology, it is intriguing to find that Assyro-Babylonian astronomical records described the planet

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17. B. Tedlock, "The Road of Light...", in A. Aveni ed., *The Sky and Mayan Literature* (Oxford, 1992), p. 28. See also C. Sagan & A. Druryan, *Comet* (New York, 1985), p. 14.

18. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 2 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 722.

19. R. Williamson, *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1933), p. 127.

20. R. Williamson, *Living the Sky* (Norman, 1984), p. 189.

21. W. Roth, "An Inquiry into the Animism and Folklore of Guiana Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology* 30 (1915), p. 259.

22. D. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh* (New York, 1985), p. 348.

23. S. Lagercrantz, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

24. L. Mándoki, "Two Asiatic Sidereal Names," in V. Dioszegi ed., *Popular Beliefs and Folklore Traditions in Siberia* (Bloomington, 1968), p. 489.

25. U. Dall'Olmo, "Latin Terminology Relating to Aurorae, Comets, Meteors and Novae," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 11 (1980), pp. 16-20.

Venus as “bearded.”<sup>26</sup> Such reports have generated much comment amongst scholars exploring these early texts.<sup>27</sup> Morris Jastrow, citing a planetary omen from the time of Assurbanipal (c. 668-626 BCE) referring to Venus’ beard, offered the following explanation:

“It is evident from this that the expression ‘Venus has a beard’ refers to some phenomenon connected with the appearance of the planet. In order, however, to remove all doubt as to the meaning of the phrase, the scribe has been careful enough to add an explanatory comment as follows: *zikna zak-nu ziknu* (or *zakanu na-ba-tu ba-i-lat ni-bat*, i.e., in the phrase *zikna zak-nu*, the term *ziknu* (‘beard’) means ‘to shine’, and the entire phrase therefore ‘she shines strongly’.”<sup>28</sup>

It is equally likely, however, that the gloss added by the ancient scribe represents simply his own best guess for what was, in reality, a very old idea attached to the planet-goddess, one no longer understood.<sup>29</sup> The specific context of the planet-goddess’ beard in ancient myth and art suggests that this was, in fact, the case.<sup>30</sup>

Vestiges of an anomalous “beard” are also present in the cults of other Venus-goddesses as well. The Cypriote Aphrodite was depicted as bearded, as was the Latin Venus.<sup>31</sup> Inasmuch as each of these goddesses represented the very ideal of beauty and femininity for their respective cultures, the presence of a beard is difficult to explain apart from their identification with the “female star.”<sup>32</sup>

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26. M. Jastrow, “The Bearded Venus,” *Revue Archéologique* 17 (1911), pp. 271-298. See also F. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 41.

27. See the discussion in J. Schaumberger, *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel*, Vol. 3 (Münster, 1935), p. 303.

28. M. Jastrow, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

29. D. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Groningen, 2000), p. 159 observes: “In certain cases the meanings of some technical terms in the protases [of omens] were lost, and in order to make sense of otherwise incomprehensible omens these were reinterpreted.”

30. See the discussion in E. Cochrane & D. Talbott, “When Venus was a Comet,” *Kronos* 12:1 (1987), pp. 16-17.

31. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3:8:2. See also L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. 2 (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 628.

32. This remains true even if one chooses to explain the goddess’ beards by diffusion from the cult of Ishtar—a definite possibility, in any case—as such borrowing would be most unlikely to occur in the absence of a clear recognition of their planetary nature.

## "Torch-stars"

Comets have been known as "torch stars" from time immemorial.<sup>33</sup> Yet as we have seen, it is common to find Venusian-goddesses described as a "torch" or as raining fire from heaven. Inanna, for example, was invoked as "the pure torch that flares in the sky, the heavenly light, shining bright like the day, the queen of heaven."<sup>34</sup> A leading epithet of Ishtar was "brilliant torch of heaven and earth."<sup>35</sup>

Scholars have typically sought to understand Inanna/Ishtar's "torch"-epithet by reference to Venus' brilliant appearance in the evening sky. Bob Forrest defended this position in his critique of Velikovsky:

"Velikovsky claims that Chaldean descriptions of the planet Venus are not consistent with the Venus we see today—for example, 'bright torch of heaven' and 'diamond that shines like the sun'...But when Venus is at its brightest in the early evening sky it is a beautiful sight, and it requires very little imagination to see it as a 'bright torch of heaven'."<sup>36</sup>

Although perfectly reasonable as a first attempt to account for the literary imagery, Forrest's interpretation ultimately fails because it ignores the destructive behavior associated with the heavenly "torch" (Sumerian *izi-gar*). Indeed, it is the catastrophic context of Inanna's incendiary epiphany which rules out the conventional explanation. Witness the following passages in which the planet-goddess is likened to fire (Sumerian *izi*) or said to rain fire from heaven:

"Celestial luminary, you're like the fire! Verily you [shake?] the earth. Hierodule Inanna, celestial luminary, you are like the fire!"<sup>37</sup>

"(You who are) a rain of flaming embers on the whole earth, who like a flash of lightning pushes headlong into the kur!"<sup>38</sup>

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33. U. Dall'Omo, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-20. See also S. Genuth, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton, 1997), p. 58.

34. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 139.

35. A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", *ZA* 65 (1976), p. 242.

36. B. Forrest, *Velikovsky's Sources* (Santa Barbara, 1987), p. 23.

37. M. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma* (Cincinnati, 1981), p. 130.

"I [Inanna] am the devouring fire which burns at the heart of the kur, I am the flame and the cinders which rain on enemy country."<sup>39</sup>

"You are the celestial luminary blazing like fire upon the earth."<sup>40</sup>

"Oh Inanna, when like fire you detach yourself from the sky decked with splendor."<sup>41</sup>

Are we to understand such imagery as figurative descriptions of the current Venus?

The Akkadian Ishtar is described in similar fashion. Thus, various hymns refer to Ishtar's "fire" as raining from heaven:

"By causing the heavens to tremble and the earth to quake, By the gleam which lightens in the sky, By the blazing fire which rains upon the hostile land, I am Ishtar."<sup>42</sup>

Most significant is the fact that the planet-goddess' appearance as "the torch of heaven" is indistinguishable from her warrior aspect. Witness the following hymn:

"Planet for the warcy...Gushea [an epithet of Ishtar], whose mail is combat, clothed in chilling fear...At the thought of your name, heaven and the netherworld quake...Shining torch of heaven...Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy, who wreaks destruction on the fierce, Dancing one, Ishtar..."<sup>43</sup>

In hymn after hymn, Ishtar/Venus is described as a fire-spewing warrior whose terrifying rampages usher in widespread destruction and shake the very foundations of the world:

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38. F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), citing BM 23820, 4.

39. *Ibid.*, citing P. Haupt, *Akkadische und Sumerische Keilschrifttexte* (Leipzig, 1882), 21, 51-52 = cun. 91-94.

40. M. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

41. F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 108, citing *Ninegal* 119, an unpublished hymn to Inanna.

42. Quoted in I. Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1973), p. 186.

43. B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), pp. 510-512.

"I rain battle down like flames in the fighting, I make heaven and earth shake with my cries...I, Ishtar, am queen of heaven and earth. I am the queen...I constantly traverse heaven, then (?) I trample the earth, I destroy what remains of the inhabited world."<sup>44</sup>

Now I ask: Does any of this language make sense in terms of the planet familiar to us? By what stretch of the imagination can Venus be said to shake heaven and earth or rain fire? Yet very similar descriptions of the warrior-goddess' rampage can be found throughout the ancient world, as we have documented elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

Although a detailed analysis of the literature invoking Inanna/Ishtar as a "torch-star" would be impossible here, one last example will suffice to illustrate the extraordinary coherence of the cataclysmic imagery involved, hitherto overlooked by conventional scholars. In a late Babylonian hymn, Inanna is described as follows: "May your torch, which spreads terror, flare up in the heart of heaven."<sup>46</sup> It will be observed that the "terror" associated with Venus—however we are to understand the Akkadian word *ša-lum-mat*—is said to flare up from the "heart of heaven." Yet as we have seen, such a position is impossible for Venus to assume given the current arrangement of the solar system. Most significant, however, in light of our discussion above, is the fact that ancient scribes elsewhere compared the terrifying *ša-lum-mat* to the glow of a comet (*šallummu*):

"If a UL (comet) that has a crest in front and a tail in back is seen and lights up the sky like a *šallummu*...A *šallummu* equals an awesome radiance [*ša-lum-ma-tu*], An awesome radiance (a comet) equals an awesome radiance [*me-lam-mu*]."<sup>47</sup>

As Chadwick noted in his commentary upon this latter cuneiform text, the most likely reason for the comparison is that the terrifying sheen believed to adorn comets paralleled the terrifying radiance elsewhere associated with Inanna's torch-like

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44. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

45. See here the discussion in E. Cochrane, "The Birth of Athena," *Aeon* 2:3 (1990), pp. 5-28.

46. B. Hruška, "Das spätbabylonische Lehrgedicht 'Inanna's Erhöhung'," *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969), p. 492 reads as follows: "Deine Fackel, die Schrecken verbreitet, möge inmit- ten des Himmels entzündet werden!"

47. R. Chadwick, "Identifying Comets and Meteors in Celestial Observation Literature," in H. Galter ed., *Die Rolle der Astronomie in den Kulturen Mesopotamiens* (Graz, 1993), pp. 173-174, citing K. 250 in CT XXVI 40.

epiphany: "The glow of the šallummu is likened to the terrifying lights that surrounded deities which were known as šalummatu and melammu."<sup>48</sup>

The fearsome splendor associated with Inanna/Venus is a recurring point of emphasis in the Sumerian literature.<sup>49</sup> Recall the passage quoted earlier: "To provoke shivers of fright, panic, trembling, and terror before the halo of your fearsome splendor, that is in your nature, oh Inanna!"<sup>50</sup> One can rest assured that the author of this hymn was not describing the familiar Venus on a clear summer night. Rather, Enheduanna was describing a towering, terrifying celestial form—the planet-goddess known as Inanna—one that had assumed the "fearsome splendor" and appearance everywhere associated with a great comet. In this passage, as throughout her body of hymns describing Inanna's customary appearance and behavior, Enheduanna's testimony offers a perfect example of what Jacobsen called a confrontation with the numinous—"a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a confrontation with a 'Wholly Other' outside of normal experience and indescribable in its terms; terrifying, ranging from sheer demonic dread through awe to sublime majesty; and fascinating, with irresistible attraction, demanding unconditional allegiance."<sup>51</sup>

### "Dragon stars"

Various cultures have viewed comets as dragons or as serpents moving across the sky, spewing venomous fire.<sup>52</sup> The Aztecs, among others, referred to a comet as a "star serpent."<sup>53</sup> The astronomer Peter Brown observed that peoples of Mesoamerica represented comets "by the plumed serpent depicted in various forms."<sup>54</sup>

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48. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

49. See the extensive and illuminating discussion in F. Bruschweiler, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-175.

50. *Ibid.*, with reference to A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", ZA 65 (1976), line 161.

51. *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 3.

52. In *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (New York, 1949), p. 243, it is stated: "Early conceptions of the comet saw in it a dragon or serpent."

53. C. Burland, *The Aztecs* (London, 1980), p. 102.

54. P. Brown, *Comets, Meteorites and Men* (New York, 1973), p. 18.

Similar ideas are attested in Old World cultures. Thus, an Anglo-Saxon Chronicle from 793 alludes to the disasters which followed in the wake of dragons appearing in the sky:

"Fierce, foreboding omens came over the land of Northumbria and wretchedly terrified the people. There were excessive whirlwinds, lightning storms and fiery dragons were seen flying in the sky. These signs were followed by great famine."<sup>55</sup>

If scholars have been hardpressed to explain the ancient literature describing Venus as a warring "torch," they are at a complete loss for words when encountering descriptions of the planet as a fire-spewing dragon. In Mesoamerica, for example, Venus was known as the "plumed serpent star."<sup>56</sup> Confronted with the pervasive ophidian imagery in the cult of the Aztec Quetzalcoatl, typically acknowledged to have a close connection with the planet Venus, a leading scholar offered the following "explanation" of this strange juxtaposition of imagery:

"The association of Venus and Quetzalcoatl can probably be attributed to the fact that when this planet sets upon the moving waters of the Pacific, its reflection seems not unlike a serpent with brilliant scales and plumes."<sup>57</sup>

If so, it is certainly strange to find that ophidian imagery attaches to Venus in the Old World as well. Of the planet-goddess Nehanda, the Karanga of Africa relate that: "She could also transform herself into a serpent."<sup>58</sup> This testimony from South Africa recalls the passage from "The Exaltation of Inanna," quoted previously, wherein the planet-goddess is described as a dragon raining fire from the heavens:

"Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the land, When you roar at the earth like Thunder, no vegetation can stand up to you. A flood descending from its mountain, Oh foremost one, you are the Inanna of heaven and earth! Raining the fanned fire down upon the nation..."<sup>59</sup>

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55. Quoted from V. Clube & B. Napier, *The Cosmic Winter* (London, 1990), p. 19.

56. B. Tedlock, "The Road of Light: Theory and Practice of Maya Skywatching," in A. Aveni ed., *The Sky and Mayan Literature* (Oxford, 1992), p. 55.

57. M. León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, 1963), p. 51.

58. H. von Sicard, "Karanga Stars," *NADA* 19 (1943), p. 50.

59. W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 15.



Since Venus does not currently present the appearance of a serpent-dragon raining fire, scholars have sought to divorce Inanna from the planet when attempting to understand such vivid imagery. Thus, while admitting that a serpent-dragon would be a fine manifestation of a comet,<sup>60</sup> Forrest concludes that Inanna's appearance as a dragon has reference to the goddess as a personification of the earth!<sup>61</sup> Such an interpretation is entirely unwarranted, however, for the ancient texts leave no room for doubt that it is a celestial body (Venus) that is the subject of the ophidian imagery surrounding Inanna/Ishtar. Witness the following passage from a Sumerian temple-hymn: "Inanna...the great dragon who speaks inimical words to the evil, ...Through her the firmament is made beautiful in the evening."<sup>62</sup>

The astronomers Clube and Napier, while conceding that cometary motifs pervade the cult of Inanna, would follow Forrest in seeking to divorce the goddess from the Cytherean planet. Pointing to "new astronomical information," the authors offered the following reinterpretation:

"Inanna is usually interpreted by scholars as the planet Venus, and in the absence of new astronomical information this is no doubt the best that one could have done. However it seems that the settled, spectacular, celestial imagery of the goddess Inanna, a morning and evening object 'crowned with great horns' and associated with the omega symbolism of Hathor, is more compatible with the thesis that the goddess was a great comet in a short-period orbit."<sup>63</sup>

But there is no evidence that Inanna was ever represented as a "great comet in a short-period orbit" during the 3000 years of Mesopotamian history. With this rash conjecture, one completely at odds with the historical record, Clube and Napier manage to avoid drawing the conclusion most compatible with the full body of evidence—it was Venus itself which only recently presented a comet-like appearance.

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60. B. Forrest, *Velikovsky's Sources, Notes and Index Volume* (1983), p. 564.

61. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 227.

62. A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), p. 36.

63. *The Cosmic Winter* (London, 1990), p. 180.

## "Smoking stars"

The Chukchee of northeastern Siberia refer to comets as "smoking stars."<sup>64</sup> Among Polynesian Islanders, comets were known as *pusa-loa*, or "elongated smoke."<sup>65</sup> Various African peoples likewise compare the tail of a comet to "smoke." The Djaga, for example, view the tail as "smoke of the smallpox fire" and believe it portends a smallpox epidemic.<sup>66</sup>

Similar conceptions are attested in the New World. Among the various names for "comet" in Maya lore was *budz ek*, "smoke stars."<sup>67</sup> The Aztec name for comet was *citlalimpopoca*, or "smoking star."

In *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico*, Anthony Aveni presented a series of illustrations from the Aztec Codex Telleriano-Remensis dating to the sixteenth century, some of which are accompanied by captions pertaining to comet lore. Several make reference to the impending death of a ruler or great chief and thus are of interest inasmuch as they conform with a popular belief surrounding comets. But it is another caption affixed to a comet-like object which is of utmost interest for, as Aveni reports, "the caption in 9h tells us that the star Venus is smoking."<sup>68</sup>

Obviously puzzled by this report, Aveni goes on to speculate that "perhaps a cometary object appeared near the planet."<sup>69</sup> An alternative interpretation would take the report as it stands and consider the possibility that the Aztecs—rightly or wrongly—ascribed a comet-like nature to Venus.<sup>70</sup> Support for this interpretation comes from the fact that the Maya preserved similar beliefs. Thus, a text in the "Songs of Dzitbalche" also identifies Venus as a "smoking star."<sup>71</sup>

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64. W. Bogoras, "The Folklore of Northeastern Asia, as compared with that of Northwestern America," *American Anthropologist* 4 (1902), p. 593.

65. R. Williamson, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

66. S. Lagercrantz, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

67. W. Lamb, "Star Lore in the Yucatec Maya Dictionaries," in R. Williamson ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the Americas* (Austin, 1981), p. 237.

68. A. Aveni, *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin, 1981), p. 27.

69. *Ibid.*

70. This was the position adopted by I. Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1950), p. 173.

71. S. Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya* (Austin, 1999), p. 251.

Interestingly enough, similar beliefs are attested in Europe around the time of the Renaissance, a period of intense interest in comets. Horatio Grassi, for example, a participant in a series of famous debates with Galileo inspired by the appearance of three comets in 1618, observed that until recently the ignorant mass "had considered Venus as a comet."<sup>72</sup>

By itself, of course, Grassi's report counts for little and might easily be dismissed as meaningless trivia. Viewed in the light of the roughly contemporaneous testimony from Mesoamerica, however, the report takes on an added significance and might well be interpreted as a faint reminiscence of ancient folklore no longer understood.

## Summary

A survey of the ancient terminology surrounding comets reveals that each of the primary terms commonly used to signify "comet" was also attached to the planet Venus. In this sense the evidence from ancient language supports and corroborates the testimony from ancient literature, which likewise describes the planet Venus in comet-like terms.

In reflecting upon the terminology shared by Venus and comets, it is essential that one keep in mind the fundamental purpose of language. Language is a means of communicating information, often with regards to the fundamental nature of the world around us. In origin and function, individual nouns and adjectives typically serve to distinguish one natural object from another. Names and epithets applied to Venus, for example, ought to serve to distinguish that planet from other celestial bodies. Thus, Venus might be called the "Green star" in order to distinguish it from Mars, the "Red star." Communication would not be furthered, and confusion would soon result, were names and epithets to be applied to various natural objects in a haphazard fashion, with little regard for observational reality. Hence the remarkable anomaly presented by the fact that Venus and comets share so much terminology in common.

It is true that there will always be room for some overlapping of terminology, particularly when the respective celestial bodies share a fundamental attribute in common. Thus, it is easy to understand how Venus, like the Sun, might be compared to

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72. H. Grassi, "An Astronomical Disputation on the Three Comets of the year 1618," in S. Drake & C. O' Malley eds., *The Controversy of the Comets of 1618* (Philadelphia, 1960), p. 7.

a brilliant gem gleaming in the sky. But such natural vicissitudes of language will never explain why Venus was described as a "tailed" or "long-haired" star.

It is also to be expected that, with the continued evolution of a particular language, such factors as metaphor, mythical imagery, and sympathetic magic will come to play a certain role in the application of names and epithets to the various celestial bodies. What the Maya were trying to convey by referring to Venus as a "Wasp star," for example, is unknown, being apparently unique to that culture. But it likely reflects some aspect of that planet's mythical character as understood by that culture. Once again, however, such factors will never explain why Venus was described with comet-like terminology in the Old World as well as the New for the simple reason that it is exceedingly unlikely that the same metaphor or "mythical" interpretation would occur to different cultures in the absence of a common observational stimulus. That the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia, like the peoples of Mesoamerica, compared Venus to a serpent-dragon is most plausibly explained by the fact that that planet once presented the appearance of a giant serpent spanning the skies.

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"Next to the sun they adored and made more sacrifices to this star [The Morning Star] than to any other celestial or terrestrial creature. The astronomers knew on what day it would appear again in the east after it had lost itself or disappeared in the west, and for this first day they prepared a feast, warfare, and sacrifices. The ruler gave an Indian who was sacrificed at dawn, as soon as the star became visible... The reason why this star was held in such esteem by the lords and people, and the reason why they counted the days by this star and yielded reverence and offered sacrifices to it, was because these deluded natives thought or believed that when one of their principal gods, named Topiltzin or Quetzalcoatl, died and left this world, he transformed himself into that resplendent star..."<sup>1</sup>

A fundamental question for students of myth in general, and for students of astral lore in particular, is how to explain seemingly irrational beliefs which are commonly held around the world? As the product of free association, fantasy, or creative imagination? As the product of a collective unconscious, after the fashion of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung?

Consider the curious beliefs surrounding comets. In the entire corpus of ancient myth and folklore, it would be difficult to point to a set of beliefs as universally consistent as that surrounding comets. From time immemorial, in advanced cul-

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1. A. Aveni, "The Real Venus-Kukulcan in the Maya Inscriptions and Alignments," in M. Robertson & V. Fields eds., *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, 1986 (Norman, 1991), p. 310, citing Jacinto de la Serna, an author from the mid-seventeenth century.

tures as well as in those little removed from the Stone Age, comets have been viewed as agents of disaster and impending doom. A glance at any of the standard encyclopedias of folklore will readily confirm this point. Funk and Wagnall's encyclopedia, for example, includes the following entry under "comet":

"Not only in antiquity, but through the centuries among all peoples, comets have aroused in man a feeling of terror and foreboding. These mysterious visitors in the heavens have been thought to be connected with war, famine, the plague, the downfall of kings and monarchs, the end of the world, universal suffering, ill-luck, and sickness."<sup>2</sup>

In *Comet*, Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan acknowledged the consensus of opinion surrounding comets:

"Rarely have so many diverse cultures, all over the planet, agreed so well. In the history of the world, more societies have advocated incest or infanticide than have taught that comets were benign, or even neutral. Everywhere on Earth, with only a few exceptions, comets were harbingers of unwanted change, ill fortune, evil. It was common knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

Although hundreds of books have been written on comets, it would be difficult to find a single coherent analysis of the peculiar beliefs surrounding these exotic celestial bodies. An explanation of the origin or stubborn persistence of cometary lore is nowhere to be found. The reason for this "black hole" in understanding is obvious: the mythology surrounding comets is impossible to reconcile with modern astronomy's understanding of cometary bodies.

While it is not my intent here to offer a systematic analysis of the rich mythology surrounding comets, a brief summary is in order as it will further illuminate ancient conceptions associated with Venus. Included among the primary motifs surrounding comets are the following: (1) A general association with natural disasters (earthquakes, pestilence, destructive winds, universal darkness, etc.); (2) Harbinger of the end of the world or some historical epoch; (3) Harbinger of the death of a great king or the end of a notable dynasty or empire; (4) Sign of the transmigration of a mighty king's soul.

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2. M. Leach ed., *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (New York, 1949), p. 243.

3. C. Sagan & A. Druyan, *Comet* (New York, 1985), pp. 14-15.

That comets were universally regarded as omens of natural disasters of one form or another is well attested. During Graeco-Roman times, for example, it was commonly held "that the comet was inevitably the presage of some cataclysmic event."<sup>4</sup> Sture Lagercrantz, upon reviewing folklore amongst the various tribes of Africa, concluded that "generally speaking comets are considered to be portents of disaster."<sup>5</sup>

Various cultures thought that a comet heralded a period of universal darkness.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, among others, held that the appearance of a comet forecast destructive winds and drought.<sup>7</sup> Tycho Brahe, writing over a thousand years later, expressed similar views. The Great Dane associated the appearance of a comet with destructive winds, floods, earthquakes, famine, pestilence, war, and the death of kings.<sup>8</sup> It was Tycho's precise measurements of the parallax of the comet of 1577 which established the scientific investigation of comets on a solid footing by providing the necessary proof that they moved outside the immediate sphere of the Earth, thereby overthrowing the prevailing Aristotelian view that comets were an atmospheric phenomenon.

For many ancient skywatchers the appearance of a comet portended the end of an age or dynasty. The ancient Chinese held that "comets eliminate the old and inaugurate a new order."<sup>9</sup> Lucan, similarly, spoke of the "comet that changes kingdoms on earth."<sup>10</sup> Comets were harbingers of war and the change of dynasties according to Origen.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare drew upon this archetypal symbolism in *Henry the Sixth*: "Comets importing change of Times and States, Brandish your crystal Tresses in the skies."<sup>12</sup>

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4. A. Barrett, "Observations of Comets in Greek and Roman Sources," *Journal of Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 72 (1978), p. 81.

5. S. Lagercrantz, "Traditional Beliefs in Africa Concerning Meteors, Comets, and Shooting Stars," in *Festschrift für Ad. Jensen* (Munich, 1964), p. 320.

6. G. Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York, 1961/2), p. 360.

7. C. Hellman, *The Comet of 1577* (New York, 1944), p. 21.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

9. M. Loewe, "The Han View of Comets," *The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 52 (1980), p. 11.

10. Lucan I: 528-529.

11. C. Hellman, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

12. *Henry the Sixth* I:1-2

Of all the omens associated with comets, none is more prominent than their reputation as a harbinger of the death of a king or great leader. As bizarre as this idea appears to the modern mind, similar beliefs prevailed seemingly everywhere. It is attested in the earliest extant Chinese astrological records, for example. In the famous cometary atlas from the tomb at Mawangdui an omen affixed to a drawing of a comet reads: "There will be deaths of kings."<sup>13</sup> Babylonian astronomical tablets also mention the death of kings in conjunction with the appearance of a comet.<sup>14</sup>

During the Roman period, it was commonly believed that the appearance of a comet spelled the death of kings. "The hair of the baleful star," according to the emperor Vespasian, "portends change to monarchs."<sup>15</sup> Tacitus offered the following commentary with reference to a brilliant comet which appeared during the reign of Nero:

"A comet blazed into view—in the opinion of the crowd, an apparition boding change to monarchies. Hence, as though Nero were already dethroned, men began to inquire on whom the next choice should fall."<sup>16</sup>

Among the various Germanic peoples, according to Grimm, the belief persisted that a comet's "appearance betokens events fraught with peril, especially the death of a king."<sup>17</sup> Similar beliefs are to be found among the Polynesian Islanders.<sup>18</sup> In Africa as well, "the death portent is generally considered to apply to some mighty chief or 'king'."<sup>19</sup>

Analogous ideas are to be found in the New World. In *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico*, the astronomer Anthony Aveni documented the intense interest in celestial phenomena amongst the Aztecs and Maya. Surviving manuscripts contain numerous

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13. Xi Ze-Zong, "The Cometary Atlas in the Silk Book of the Han Tomb at Mawangdui," *Chinese Astronomy and Astrophysics* 8 (1984), p. 2.

14. H. Hunger, F. Stephenson, C. Walker, K. Yau, *Halley's Comet in History* (London, 1985), p. 18.

15. Quoted from S. Genuth, *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton, 1997), p. 24.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

17. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 2 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 722.

18. R. Williamson, *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1933), p. 132.

19. S. Lagercrantz, *op. cit.*, p. 321.



illustrations of comets and, as Aveni points out, these are frequently coupled with statements detailing the ominous nature of comets: "These usually signify that a person of nobility will die."<sup>20</sup>

Hellman has chronicled the persistence of such conceptions from the time of Aristotle to the Middle Ages. The opinion of Synesius, a Christian Neoplatonist of the fourth century A. D., may be taken as typical of this period:

"And whenever these comets appear, they are an evil portent, which the diviners and soothsayers appease. They assuredly foretell public disasters, enslavements of nations, desolations of cities, deaths of kings."<sup>21</sup>

The astronomer Peter Brown observed that the peculiar ideas surrounding comets were so deeply ingrained that chroniclers occasionally may have invented cometary sightings in the wake of a famous king's death:

"Every bright comet which appeared during the early medieval period, the Middle Ages, and even the Renaissance had itself affixed to the death or misfortune of a prominent historical figure. These beliefs were so widespread that (according to Pingré) the chronicles recorded in good faith comets which were never actually seen—such as the one of AD 814 which allegedly heralded the death of Charlemagne."<sup>22</sup>

The appearance of a comet, in addition to signalling the demise of a great king, appears on occasion to have been envisaged as the "soul" of a dying king! This belief is most familiar, perhaps, from a famous passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, wherein the poet makes the soul of Julius Caesar fly off as a comet:

"And as he spoke our mother Venus vanished, invisible to senators or men, to pace her way among the senate's chambers where Caesar's soul, caught up between her breasts, Was hers to find its place among the stars. Then as she mounted toward the midnight heavens, She felt his fiery soul burn at her heart and set it free to see it leap the moon, Rising through the night, a comet's tail of fire, So Caesar burns as an eternal star."<sup>23</sup>

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20. A. Aveni, *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin, 1981), p. 27.

21. Quoted from C. Hellman, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

22. P. Brown, *Comets, Meteorites and Men* (New York, 1973), p. 16.

23. H. Gregory, translator, *The Metamorphoses* (New York, 1958), p. 440.

Ovid's imagery, coupled with the appearance of a brilliant comet during the games celebrated soon after the death of Caesar, prompted the famous phrase of Shakespeare: "When beggars die there are no comets seen; the Heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."<sup>24</sup>

Lest it be thought that Ovid's comparison of the king's departing soul to a comet is original with him, it is worth noting that analogous beliefs are to be found around the globe. To the Polynesian Islanders, a comet signified the flight of the soul, in addition to the death of a king.<sup>25</sup> The Eghap of Africa believe that a comet is the soul of a dead chief smoking its ceremonial pipe.<sup>26</sup> The Warao Indians of Venezuela believe that the soul of a shaman ascends to heaven in the form of a comet.<sup>27</sup> Among the Australian Aborigines of north-eastern Arnhem Land, meteors are believed to carry the souls of the dead to the spirit world in the sky.<sup>28</sup> The Wintu Indians of California expressed similar ideas.<sup>29</sup> James Frazer summarized this archaic belief-complex as follows:

"A widespread superstition...associates meteors or falling stars with the souls of the dead. Often they are believed to be the spirits of the departed on their way to the other world."<sup>30</sup>

The question facing the investigator of such traditions is not only how to account for their origin but, also, how to understand their strange specificity? Astronomers and scholars alike seem at a loss to explain the curious mythology surrounding comets. Why would a comet be envisaged as the soul of a great king?

A historian of science pointed to diffusion from Babylon as the most likely explanation for the belief that a comet heralds the death of kings:

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24. *Julius Caesar* 2:2:36-37.

25. R. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 134.

26. S. Lagercrantz, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

27. J. Wilbert, "Eschatology in a Participatory Universe," in E. Benson ed., *Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Columbian America* (Washington D. C., 1974), p. 170.

28. R. Haynes, "Aboriginal Astronomy," *Australian Journal of Astronomy* 4:3 (1992), p. 139.

29. T. Hudson, "California's First Astronomers," in E. Krupp ed., *Archaeoastronomy and the Roots of Science* (Boulder, 1984), p. 39.

30. J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: The Dying God* (London, 1920), p. 64.

"The connection between comets and the downfall of princes may have originated with Babylonian astronomers, who practiced astrology as a vital part of state-craft."<sup>31</sup>

Yet as we have seen, the association between comets and the death of kings is to be found amongst peoples scattered around the globe, including the cultures of Polynesia, Africa, and Mesoamerica. Are we to understand such traditions by diffusion from Babylon?

Brandt and Chapman, in *Introduction to Comets*, are among the few astronomers to even attempt a rational explanation of comet lore:

"Memorable events in human existence occur constantly. A bright comet might have appeared to Stone Age people at the time of a great drought when food was scarce, or at the time of a particularly disastrous hunt when tribesmen were injured or killed. The next bright comet would strike fear in their hearts. And the fear would be borne out by another setback in the peoples' hard existence. By extension, it is not difficult to imagine why similar superstitions continue in regions where civilization has barely intruded. That superstitions regarding comets are still touted in the modern civilized world is more difficult to understand. It is difficult to imagine a physical mechanism whereby a passing comet could cause specific events such as the death of a king, and scientists do not take the idea seriously."<sup>32</sup>

It will be observed that Brandt and Chapman would dismiss out of hand the very phenomenon requiring explanation—namely, the specific content of the cometary omens. Their explanation of the rich mythology of comets as the irrational by-product of the fortuitous appearance of a comet together with some natural disaster fails to address why virtually every ancient culture arrived at the same peculiar mythological "interpretations." If the origin of comet lore traces to fortuitous events associated with the appearance of a brilliant comet, surely it must be expected that a significant percentage of ancient cultures would ascribe a positive influence to these celestial agents? Yet few do, as we have seen.

That cultures throughout the world consistently associate comets with the death of kings and a period of universal darkness will never be explained by coincidence alone. The "explanation" of comet-lore offered by Brandt and Chapman not only tends to underestimate the rational powers of our ancestors, it would also appear to be at odds with the fact that ancient man was entirely dependent on an accurate

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31. S. Genuth, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

32. J. Brandt & R. Chapman, *Introduction to Comets* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 218.

reading of the environment for his continued survival and thus was in a good position to assess the actual consequences of a comet's appearance. Rather than continuing to discount the folklore surrounding comets as the product of irrational fears and "primitive" thinking, perhaps we should consider the possibility that the ancients' testimony—as revealed in their myths and sacred traditions—is an accurate reflection of their experience.

How, then, can one account for cometary mythology without completely discounting the ancients' testimony? The answer, strange as it may seem, is to be sought for in the ancient conceptions surrounding the planet Venus (and Mars). Thus it can be shown that each of the foregoing motifs associated with comets is conspicuous in the folklore surrounding Venus.

### VENUS: HARBINGER OF DISASTER

That the planet Venus was viewed with a sense of dread and ominous portent by many ancient peoples is easy to document. In the New World as well as the Old, Venus was linked to apocalyptic doom and world-engulfing disaster. There is simply no disputing Velikovsky on this score.

The sense of terror and foreboding associated with the planet Venus is particularly apparent in Mesoamerica, where the observation and veneration of Venus played a prominent role in religious cult and ritual. For the Aztecs and Maya alike the epiphany of Venus was an occasion of terrifying portent. We have already cited Sahagún's testimony chronicling the Aztec's view of Venus:

"And when it [Venus] newly emerged, much fear came over them; all were frightened. Everywhere the outlets and openings of [houses] were closed up. It was said that perchance [the light] might bring a cause of sickness, something evil when it came to emerge."<sup>33</sup>

Omens from the Dresden Codex—a manuscript which served as a sort of astronomical divinatory almanac for the Maya—associate the heliacal rise of Venus with various calamities, ranging from the outbreak of war to famine and flood. That these omens were taken seriously by the Mesoamericans is well-documented. To cite but one of numerous examples, Maya kings sought to time their war-raids in accordance with the movements and phases of Venus.<sup>34</sup>

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33. B. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex. General History of the Things of New Spain* (Santa Fe, 1950-1970), Book 7, Chapter 3.

That the Mesoamericans were not alone in ascribing an ominous nature to the planet Venus is evidenced by the fact that similar omens were associated with Venus in the ancient Near East. The oldest Babylonian astronomical records still extant, the so-called Venus tablets of Ammizaduqa, include omens recounting the natural disasters attendant upon the appearance of the planet Venus. There, as in Mesoamerica, the appearance of Venus was associated with the outbreak of war, famine, and flooding. As to the origin of these omens surrounding Venus, Abraham Sachs—a leading authority on Babylonian astronomical texts—was forced to admit: “How, when, and why omen predictions...were attached to the Venus dates are questions that we cannot begin to answer in the present state of our knowledge.”<sup>35</sup>

Of all ancient cultures, only the Chinese kept astronomical records which rival those of the Babylonians in age and accuracy. As the Mawangdui texts confirm, the Chinese were making accurate observations of comets very early on. Certainly it is significant to find that they, too, linked Venus with ominous portents. The *Chin Shu*, an astronomical text compiled in *circa* 635 A. D., yet believed to be based on more ancient traditions, contains a list of 21 types of “ominous” or “evil” stars, this being their term for comets and other frightening celestial apparitions such as *novae*. The 19th type of “ominous star” was known as *chhang-keng* (“long-path”).<sup>36</sup> This comet was said to herald the outbreak of war and was described as being like a roll of cloth which extends across the heavens. Yet the very same name was also applied to the planet Venus!<sup>37</sup>

## VENUS AND THE DEATH OF KINGS

More than one ancient culture saw a link between the planet Venus and the death of kings. In Mesoamerica, for example, the heliacal rise of Venus was believed to portend the death of kings. B. C. Brundage expressed surprise at this particular aspect of Venusian lore:

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34. L. Schele & M. Miller, *The Blood of Kings* (New York, 1986), pp. 123, 214, 217. See also B. Tedlock, “Maya Astronomy: What We Know and How We Know It,” *Archaeoastronomy* 18 (1999), p. 41.

35. A. Sachs, “Babylonian Observational Astronomy,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. A* 276 (1974), pp. 43-44.

36. H. Yoke, “Ancient and Mediaeval Observations of Comets and Novae in Chinese Sources,” *Vistas in Astronomy* 5 (1962), p. 164.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

"It is curious that the Mesoamerican peoples thought of the Morning Star so consistently as malign. He was to them, whether they were Aztecs or Mayans, the very father of calamity. The dates of his heliacal rising were forecast so that the dooms ahead could be adequately read and prepared for...Significantly, his malice could also be directed at rulers, for if he arose in the trecana opened by 1-reed, then great lords sickened and died."<sup>38</sup>

There are hints that analogous beliefs prevailed in the ancient Near East. Thus a Babylonian omen says of Venus that "if this star rises late: the king of that land will die soon."<sup>39</sup>

Similar beliefs are to be found amongst the peoples of the South Seas, many of whom were accomplished skywatchers as evidenced by their ability to navigate the seas by the position of the stars in relation to one another and in relation to the horizon. The Polynesians, as we have seen, associated the appearance of a comet with the imminent demise of a great chief. Yet the appearance of Venus—or the conjunction of Venus with another planet known as its "love messenger," presumably Mars—was likewise said to herald the death of a great chief!<sup>40</sup>

The correspondence between the omens surrounding Venus and those associated with comets extends to the finest details. In Mesoamerica, as we learned from the testimony of Sahagún, the appearance of Venus was said to portend sickness or pestilence. Yet pestilence was commonly thought to accompany the appearance of a comet. Such was the case with the neighboring Maya, for example: "Comets are referred to in Quiché as *uje ch'umil*, 'tail of the star,' and are considered omens of massive pestilence."<sup>41</sup>

A widespread belief finds comets being linked to earthquakes.<sup>42</sup> Yet Venus, too, was associated with earthquakes. Thus, we have seen that Sumerian scribes described Inanna/Venus with an epithet signifying the "shaker of heaven and earth." Recall also the natural upheavals accompanying the epiphany of Inanna/Venus, quoted earlier:

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38. B. Brundage, *The Phoenix of the Western World* (Norman, 1982), p. 177.

39. E. Reiner & D. Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens: Part Two* (Malibu, 1981), p. 57.

40. R. Williamson, *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 128-129.

41. B. Tedlock, "The Road of Light..." in A. Aveni ed., *The Sky and Mayan Literature* (Oxford, 1992), p. 28.

42. W. Gundel, "Kometen," *RE* 11:1 (1921), col. 1144ff. See also G. Jobe, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols* (New York, 1961), p. 361.

"You make the heavens tremble and the earth quake. Great Priestess, who can soothe your troubled heart? You flash like lightning over the highlands; you throw your firebrands across the earth. Your deafening command...splits apart great mountains."<sup>43</sup>

There is also an overlap in symbolism with regards to eclipse-like phenomena, Venus and comets both being linked to periods of prolonged darkness. The Pawnee Venus, as we have seen, was described as wanting "darkness forever." Sumerian hymns to Inanna credit the planet-goddess with the ability to throw the world into darkness: "She darkens the bright daylight, turns the midday light into darkness."<sup>44</sup>

The sacred traditions from Mesoamerica are particularly telling on this score. Like most ancient peoples, the Aztecs and Maya considered eclipses of the sun to be a time of dire peril. It was commonly believed, in fact, that the world might end during a solar eclipse.<sup>45</sup> Sahagún described the Aztecs' hysteria during eclipses as follows:

"Then there was a great tumult and disorder. All were disquieted, unnerved, frightened. Then there was weeping. The common folk raised a cup, lifting their voices, making a great din, calling out, shrieking. There was shouting everywhere. People of light complexion were slain (as sacrifices); captives were killed. All offered their blood...And in all the temples there were war cries. It was thus said: 'If the eclipse of the sun is complete, it will be dark forever! The demons of darkness will come down; they will eat men.'<sup>46</sup>

Analogous beliefs are attested around the world. For much of recorded history, and well into modern times, eclipses portended the death of kings and the possible end of the world. The astronomer-priests from the Assyro-Babylonian period sought to anticipate solar eclipses so they could perform the necessary rituals in order to circumvent the death of the king.<sup>47</sup> To this day the Sherente from South America con-

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43. D. Wolkstein & S. Kramer, *Inanna* (New York, 1983), p. 95.

44. A. Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur<sub>4</sub>-ra. A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna...", *ZA* 65 (1976), p. 183.

45. For such ideas among the Maya, see S. Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya* (Austin, 1999), pp. 25-27. For analogous beliefs in the Old World, see J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 2 (Gloucester, 1976), pp. 706-707.

46. B. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex. General History of the Things of New Spain* (Santa Fe, 1950-1970), book seven.

47. D. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Groningen, 2000), pp. 132, 145.



tinue to expect the worst with each eclipse: "They were afraid that each eclipse of the sun might be the sign of a return to the 'long night' which occurred in ancient times."<sup>48</sup>

An equally widespread belief associates eclipses of the sun with the outbreak of pestilence or sickness. The testimony of the Indians from the Gran Chaco in South America may be taken as representative of this motif: "An eclipse of the sun or moon foretells disease... When the sun is covered, one may expect smallpox."<sup>49</sup>

In the eclipse tables contained within the Dresden Codex, an eclipse is symbolized by the figure of a diving god descending from the glyph of the sun (see figure one).<sup>50</sup> Eric Thompson, a pioneer in Maya studies, offered the following commentary on the eclipse monster:

"The head of the monster is hidden by a large glyph of the planet Venus. One is instantly reminded of the Aztec belief that during eclipses the monsters called Tzitzimime or Tzontemoc (head down) plunged earthwards from the sky. These monsters include Tlahuizcalpanteuctli, the god of Venus as morning star. It is therefore highly probable that this picture represents a Tzitzimitl plunging head down toward earth during the darkness of an eclipse. A glyph immediately above the picture appears to confirm this identification, for it shows the glyph of Venus with a prefix which is a picture of a person placed upside down."<sup>51</sup>

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48. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Chicago, 1969), p. 293.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

50. Adapted from Figure 5.1a in S. Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya* (Austin, 1999).

51. E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, 1971), p. 233. It should be noted that Thompson's discussion here fails to distinguish between gods properly identified with Venus and those identified with the "Morning Star," or Mars. See the discussion in E. Cochrane, "Mars Gods of the New World," *Aeon* 4:1 (1995), pp. 58-63.





Figure one

The important question as to why Venus would have been considered one of the Tzitzimime was left unaddressed by Thompson. If nothing else, it serves as yet another important reminder of the malevolent nature accorded the Cytherean planet by the skywatchers of Mesoamerica.

Thompson would understand the presence of the Venus-monster as a reference to the planet's occasional prominence during solar eclipses:

"It has been supposed that the presence of the Venus monster in this picture indicates some relationship with the revolution of the planet. It is very much more probable, however, that the Venus monster is depicted merely because Venus is the most conspicuous or most easily recognizable of the Tzitzimime and that, in consequence, the synodical period of Venus in no way enters into the calculations."<sup>52</sup>

Thompson's interpretation ignores the fact that Venus itself was credited with causing eclipses in Maya lore. Thus, a passage in "The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel" attributes eclipses to the sun's being eaten by Xulab, the latter being a Kekchi name for the planet Venus.<sup>53</sup> Michael Closs, citing ancient and modern Maya lore, argued that Venus was at once an "eclipse agent and...agent of the apocalypse."<sup>54</sup>

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52. *Ibid.*

53. L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Washington D. C., 1933), pp. 87-88. For the identification of Xulab with Venus see M. Closs, "Venus in the Maya World," in M. Robertson ed., *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, Vol. 4 (Monterey, 1979), p. 153.

In reflecting upon the anomaly presented by the Mayan belief in a connection between Venus and eclipses, as apparently testified to by the Venus monster in the Dresden Codex and more directly in "The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel," we are met with the perplexing situation whereby a people sophisticated enough to compute the future occurrence of solar eclipses is apparently unable to discern that Venus—the favorite object of their astral religion—is in no way involved with eclipses! Inasmuch as Venus is not currently associated with eclipses, scholars are inclined to overlook such traditions or dismiss them as insignificant. An examination of the evidence to be found in ancient lore, however, suggests the possibility that the Dresden Codex and "The Book of Chilam Balam" preserve archetypal traditions of momentous import—namely, that the planet Venus was once involved in a spectacular eclipse which plunged the world into prolonged darkness.

### **The Death of Quetzalcoatl**

The origin of the ominous traditions attached to Venus in Mesoamerica is to be sought for in the tragic events surrounding the "death" or transfiguration of Quetzalcoatl. As the quote at the outset of this chapter attests, it was commonly believed that Quetzalcoatl became transformed into the "Morning Star" upon his fiery demise. Represented at times as the first king of Mexico yet also as a great god or former "sun," Quetzalcoatl's death signalled the end of a Golden Age. Aztec calendars marked the day of his transfiguration as one of death and darkness:

"The day 1-Reed was celebrated in Cholula rather as the date of the god's death and his ascension as the morning star. The date 1-Reed was propitiated as an especially malign avatar."<sup>55</sup>

While several versions of the god's death have been preserved, all in post-Conquest texts compiled under Spanish influence, a common theme makes the god's "heart-soul" fly to heaven and become the Morning Star. Nicholson summarized the various accounts as follows:

"In most of the versions in which he dies, he is cremated and his soul ascends to heaven and becomes the Morning Star."<sup>56</sup>

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54. M. Closs, "Cognitive aspects of ancient Maya eclipse theory," in A. Aveni ed., *World Archaeoastronomy* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 398.

55. B. Brundage, *The Phoenix of the Western World* (Norman, 1981), p. 116.

It will be noticed that the Morning Star is not only associated with the death of the greatest Aztec king—the very prototype of kings, in fact—it was explicitly identified as the king's "soul"! The parallel with the mythology surrounding comets is both precise and telling.

Although a detailed cross-cultural analysis of the Quetzalcoatl traditions would take us too far afield, and hence must be reserved for a future volume in this series, a few brief observations are in order to clarify the logical rationale of the mythical symbolism attached to Venus. The extraordinary events commemorated in the myth of Quetzalcoatl's death—however they are to be understood from an astronomical standpoint—provide the historical backdrop for the equally extraordinary constellation of mythical motifs shared by Venus and comets. As the prototypical and exemplary model for terrestrial kings—ruler of a paradisaical Golden Age—Quetzalcoatl's "death" and transfiguration came to represent the quintessential tragedy. As a former "sun" presiding over a previous World Age, the eclipse of Quetzalcoatl came to signify the quintessential cosmic catastrophe, alternately recalled as the collapse of a Golden Age or the end of the world. As a primary player in those extraordinary and decidedly catastrophic events—and as the first star to appear in the wake of the *Götterdämmerung*—the Morning Star became intimately associated with the death of kings and apocalyptic visions of cosmic disaster.<sup>57</sup> Thousands of years after the events in question, Aztec and Maya skywatchers continued to dread the heliacal rise of the Morning Star lest it would once again mark the death of kings and spell the end of the world.<sup>58</sup>

## Summary

Evidence collected from all corners of the globe confirms that Venus and comets share an ominous and remarkably specific set of mythological motifs. It is our position that an association like that documented between Venus/comets, eclipses, pestilence, earthquakes, world-ending disaster, and the death of kings would never

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56. H. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in G. Ekholm & I. Bernal eds., *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica* (Austin, 1971), p. 429.

57. In a future work, we intend to clarify the respective roles of Venus and Mars in these pivotal events.

58. It is most significant that the base date of the Dresden Codex—the aforementioned 1-Reed associated with the death of Quetzalcoatl—was marked by a conjunction of Venus and Mars. See the discussion in F. Lounsbury, "The Base of the Venus Table of the Dresden Codex, and its Significance for the Calendar-Correlation Problem," in A. Aveni & G. Brotherston eds., *Calendars in Mesoamerica and Peru* (Oxford, 1983), p. 13.

arise spontaneously around the globe if that association had no observational basis in reality; i. e., if the appearance of Venus/comets is a typically benign affair, as per the opinion of modern astronomy. A spectacular and traumatic cataclysm involving Venus/comets, on the other hand, could easily produce similar beliefs around the globe for the simple reason that the respective local traditions each had a similar basis in experience. Beliefs rooted in direct observation and a perfectly rational sense of terror and foreboding would presumably be difficult to extinguish, particularly if those beliefs were continually reenacted and reinforced via ancient myth and ritual. Comparative analysis of ancient myth renders it highly probable that it was an archetypal "Ur-eclipse" associated with the planet Venus—aided and abetted by the planet Mars—which inspired the complex of mythical motifs surrounding that planet, comets, and eclipses. The overlap in symbolism stems from the fact that it was Venus' disheveled "hair" which darkened the sun and ushered in a "long night" remembered as the end of the world.

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"The ultimate origin of nearly all folktales and myths must remain a mystery, just as the origin of language is a mystery."<sup>1</sup> Stith Thompson

With the retreat of the Old European religions under the onslaught of Christianity, the heathen goddesses suffered a diminution in status and degradation in form. Not to be repressed entirely, they eventually resurfaced in slightly modified form as demons or as lurid characters in folklore and fairy tales. The curious traditions surrounding witches are a case in point. For untold centuries, in Europe as on other continents, witches have been credited with the ability to fly through the sky, cast spells, poison, and blot out the sun. As Grimm documented, the folklore associated with witches is of great antiquity and reflects fundamental aspects of the cult of the mother goddess: "The details of witchcraft, the heart-eating, the storm-raising, the riding through air, are all founded on very ancient and widely scattered traditions."<sup>2</sup>

It is understandable that the modern reader might be skeptical of discovering much of historical or scientific import in ancient and medieval beliefs surrounding witches and the instruments of witchcraft. After all, the current skies are not blackened by the spectacle of disheveled hags flying about, as in the *Wizard of Oz*; and

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1. "Myth and Folktales," in T. Sebeok ed., *Myth: A Symposium* (Bloomington, 1955), p. 176.

2. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 3 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 1077.

the days when the educated public believed that witches caused eclipses of the sun are long behind us. It might also appear as if we have strayed far from our primary subject matter—ancient conceptions surrounding the planet Venus.

Yet it is a demonstrable fact that many of the world's great goddesses are described in terms otherwise befitting a witch. Inanna-Lamashtu, as we have seen, was represented as a hag-like demon with disheveled hair, swooping down from the sky and making off with children. A cognate figure, under the name of Lilith, played a prominent role in ancient and modern Jewish lore, wherein she was represented as a child-stealing witch with horribly disheveled hair.<sup>3</sup> A magical text from the first millennium AD contains the following curse directed at Lilith: "Naked shall you be driven away, unclothed, with your hair loose and streaming behind your back."<sup>4</sup>

The Norse Freyja, in addition to her roles as warrior and lamenting goddess, also appears as a witch. In the *Völuspa*, for example, the goddess (as Gullveig) is invoked as follows: "Witch was her name in the halls that knew her, a sorceress, casting evil spells."<sup>5</sup>

The great goddess assumes the form of a witch in Slavic lore as well. Marija Gimbutas offered a representative example of this mythical archetype from Russia:

"Baba Yaga, the ancient Goddess of Death and Regeneration in Slavic mythology, is well preserved in folk tales (mainly Russian) in a degraded form, i.e., as a witch. She might be depicted as an evil old hag who eats humans, especially children, or as a wise, prophetic old woman. In appearance, she is tall, bony legged, pestle headed, and has a long nose and disheveled hair."<sup>6</sup>

Although witch-like characteristics can be found within the cults of most great goddesses, it is the Germanic Holda and Greek Hecate who offer truly exemplary portraits of the Witch-Goddess. Curiously enough, however, leading scholars have compared both figures to the Latin goddess Venus.

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3. S. Hurwitz, *Lilith—The First Eve* (Einsiedeln, 1992), p. 103, describes Lilith's appearance on Aramaic magic bowls as follows: "She is mostly depicted as naked, with prominent breasts and unbound hair that streams wildly behind her back."

4. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

5. *Völuspa* 22, as translated by P. Terry, *Poems of the Elder Edda* (Philadelphia, 1990), p. 2. See also G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), pp. 158-159.

6. M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco, 1989), p. 210.

## Holda

Amongst the various Germanic races, Holda/Holle appears as a disheveled crone flying through the night-sky. While riding on the wind, she is said to be "clothed in terror" and accompanied by a "furious host," the latter composed of disembodied souls and other ghoulish beings.<sup>7</sup> Holle-riding, "to ride with Holle," was deemed equivalent to the nocturnal ride of witches.<sup>8</sup>

Despite a bloody, centuries-long crusade against heathen religion and witchcraft, Christianity never did succeed in wholly eradicating the memory of the Germanic goddess. Rather, Dame Holda lived on in popular consciousness, particularly in German fairy tales, as Gimbutas documented:

"In spite of the horrible war against women and their lore and the demonization of the Goddess, the memories of her live on in fairy tales, rituals, customs, and in language. Collections such as Grimm's German tales are rich in prehistoric motifs describing the function of this Winter Goddess Frau Holla (Holle, Hell, Holda, Perchta, etc.). She is the ugly Old Hag with a long nose, large teeth, and disheveled hair."<sup>9</sup>

Once beautiful, the goddess' transformation into a witch occurs in the blink of an eye:

"Hulda, instead of her divine shape, assumes the appearance of an ugly old woman, long-nosed, big toothed, with bristling and thick-matted hair. 'He's had a jaunt with Holle,' they say of a man whose hair sticks up in tangled disorder; so children are frightened with her or her equally hideous train... In a nursery-tale... she is depicted as an *old witch* with *long teeth*; according to the difference of story, her kind and gracious aspect is exchanged for a dark and dreadful one."<sup>10</sup>

Disheveled hair, it will be noticed, is a prominent feature of the Witch-Goddess. Indeed, an epithet of Holda—*Werra*—is thought to commemorate her "tangled, shaggy hair."<sup>11</sup>

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7. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. I (Gloucester, 1976), pp. 265-272.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

9. M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco, 1989), p. 319.

10. J. Grimm, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Although later legends gave Holda an increasingly anthropomorphic form, making of her a spinning wife, enchantress, or spirit of the local water-spring, Grimm observes that the Germanic goddess was originally located in the sky.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Grimm places the identification of Holda/Holle with the Latin Venus as "beyond question."<sup>13</sup>

In Norwegian and Danish folk-tales, Holda was known as Huldra. Like Holda, the Danish demon was described as a witch with a penchant for making off with the neighborhood children. Otherwise beautiful, Huldra had a most peculiar anatomical feature—a tail!<sup>14</sup>

## Hecate

The patron-goddess of witches and sorceresses, Hecate was one of the most popular goddesses in all of Greece. She is first attested in Hesiod, where she is described as an all-powerful mother goddess, equally at home in heaven or on earth.<sup>15</sup> Early epithets confirm that she had a benevolent aspect (e.g., *Kourotrophos*) and she was invoked as a goddess of childbirth and marriage. Other epithets mark her as a goddess of the crossroads (*Trivia*) and protectress of doors and entrances (*Epipyrgidia*).<sup>16</sup>

In a development not unlike that which saw Inanna transformed into the witch-like Lamashtu, Hecate eventually came to be regarded as the epitome of the terrible goddess, "the principal source and originator of all that was ghostly and uncanny."<sup>17</sup> Sophocles and Euripides describe her as a witch and as the Queen of Hell.<sup>18</sup> The Witch-Goddess was said to fly about at night on the wind while brandishing torches.<sup>19</sup> Like Holda, Hecate was intimately associated with a train of souls and howling dogs, the latter said to surround the goddess on her nocturnal

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12. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

13. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 935.

14. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 271.

15. *Theogony* 411-452.

16. Aristophanes, *Vesp.* 804. See also the discussion in C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), pp. 8-9.

17. E. Rohde, *Psyche*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1966), p. 297. Rohde's summary of Hecate's cult remains one of the most insightful to this day.

18. *Helen* 569-570.



jaunts: "Queen of the spirits of the dead, she was active at night, accompanied by a retinue of dogs and ghosts of suicides or those who had died a violent death."<sup>20</sup>

A description of Hecate from the *Greek Magical Papyrus* emphasizes her demonic nature:

"O nether and nocturnal, and infernal Goddess of the dark...O you with hair of serpents, serpent-girded, who drink blood, who bring death and destruction, and who feast on hearts..."<sup>21</sup>

The cannibalism ascribed to Hecate recalls the revolting behavior attributed to Kali, Anat, and other warrior-goddesses. Yet H. J. Rose, together with other scholars, called attention to the fundamental affinity of Hecate with Aphrodite.<sup>22</sup> This is baffling at first sight, for what could the Witch-Goddess have to do with the Queen of Heaven? The answer, quite simply, is everything, for the Witch-Goddess, like the Queen of Heaven, has her origin in the prehistoric appearance of the planet Venus.

### "Witch-Star"

If indeed the witch-like characteristics of various goddesses reflect ancient conceptions associated with the planet Venus, one would not be surprised to find an explicit connection between that planet and witchcraft. On this score the ancient sources will not disappoint. Babylonian astronomical texts denote the planet Venus as the "witch-star" (kakkab kaššāptu).<sup>23</sup> One is hardpressed to find a rational explanation for this bizarre epithet applied to Venus apart from the thesis offered here.

A reminiscence of the planet Venus as witch is also apparent in ancient Norse lore, as Grimm pointed out long ago: "There is perhaps more of a mythic meaning in the name *nahtfare* for evening star (Heumanni opusc. 453. 460), as the same word is used of the witch or wise-woman out on her midnight jaunt."<sup>24</sup>

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19. L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. 2 (New Rochelle, 1977), p. 505.

20. V. Newall, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Magic* (New York, 1974), p. 94.

21. 4:2854-67 as translated in J. Rabinowitz, *The Rotting Goddess* (Brooklyn, 1998), p. 62.

22. H. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York, 1959), p. 122.

23. F. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 62.

24. See J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. II (Gloucester, 1976), p. 723.

Arabic lore likewise describes Venus as a "witch-star." Thus, a quaint legend tells of Mohammed entering the sacred precinct of al-'Uzza and chopping down a tree beloved by the planet-goddess, thereby arousing her wrath. At that point, al-'Uzza assumed the form of a witch with wildly disheveled hair and gnashing teeth.<sup>25</sup>

## Summary

Students of ancient myth and folklore, upon being confronted with images of the "terrible goddess" such as the witch, have typically found it difficult to understand them by reference to the natural world.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, attempts have been made to find an explanation in terms of subjective psychological factors. Erich Neumann's analysis is typical in this regard:

"The symbolism of the Terrible Mother draws its images predominantly from the 'inside'; that is to say, the negative elementary character of the Feminine expresses itself in fantastic and chimerical images that do not originate in the outside world. The reason for this is that the Terrible Female is a symbol for the unconscious. And the dark side of the Terrible Mother takes the form of monsters, whether in Egypt or India, Mexico or Etruria, Bali or Rome. In the myths and tales of all peoples, ages, and countries—and even in the nightmares of our own nights—witches and vampires, ghouls and specters, assail us, all terrifyingly alike."<sup>27</sup>

Our hypothesis would turn that of Neumann on its head: Archetypal images of the terrible goddess—Lamashtu, Holda, Hecate, Kali, the witch—have an objective basis in historical fact, tracing ultimately to the prehistoric appearance of the planet Venus while displaying a comet-like phase.<sup>28</sup> In the ancient tradition of Inanna/Lamashtu falling from heaven with disheveled hair—understood here as a spectacular episode in the natural history of the planet Venus—we recognize the celestial

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25. M. Höfner, "Die vorislamischen Religionen Arabiens," in H. Gese *et al.* eds., *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer* (Stuttgart, 1970), p. 363.

26. A. Eaton, *The Goddess Anat: The History of Her Cult, Her Mythology and Her Iconography* (New Haven, 1964), p. 88, in a discussion of the goddess' furor, remarked: "How the same goddess came to have not only associations with the idea of maternal care and protectiveness, but with the idea of force and violence as well, is difficult to understand. These aspects of the divine personality seem so completely contradictory."

27. E. Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 148-149.

28. This said, it is difficult to deny the truth of Neumann's observation—arrived at on the basis of clinical findings—that archetypal images of the terrible goddess became imprinted upon the psyche of mankind, where they linger on and continue to haunt.

prototype for the witch as portrayed in ancient myth and folklore. The widespread beliefs surrounding witches are "all terrifyingly alike"—to use Neumann's phrase—precisely because they originated in common experience and were witnessed by cultures the world over. Witches were distinguished by their disheveled hair precisely because Venus itself presented the appearance of having "disheveled" hair. As witches were believed to be capable of raising storms by unbinding their hair,<sup>29</sup> so too was Venus described as being a storm-raiser *extraordinaire*. The seemingly supernatural powers credited to witches, such as the ability to "fly" through the sky or effect an eclipse of the sun,<sup>30</sup> are best understood as vestiges of ancient myths describing the terrifying behavior associated with the Venus-comet. From the standpoint of comparative religion, the Witch-Goddess is best understood as a watered-down version or caricature of the warring or mourning goddess, roaming the world with horribly disheveled hair while raising storms and wreaking destruction, threatening to blot out the sun forever.

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29. B. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco, 1983), p. 368 notes the "unflagging superstitious belief in Christian Europe that witches' hair controlled the weather. Churchman said witches raised storms, summoned demons, and produced all sorts of destruction by unbinding their hair. As late as the 17th century the *Compendium Maleficarum* said witches could control rain, hail, wind, and lightning in such a way."

30. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 3 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 1089 notes that witches were called *sólar böl*, "sun's bale," and *hvel-svelg himins*, "swallower of heaven's wheel," because they were thought to cause solar eclipses.

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"Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb."<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche

In 1937, while excavating an ancient Inanna temple at Tell Brak, Max Mallowan—the archaeologist husband of Agatha Christie—found thousands of figurines distinguished primarily by their prominent eyes (see figure one). On the basis of their stratigraphical position, Mallowan dated the peculiar figurines—which he called "eye-idols"—to the first half of the third millennium B.C. (the Jemdat Nasr period).<sup>2</sup> It was Mallowan's opinion that these idols represented the Sumerian goddess Inanna.<sup>3</sup>

Similar artifacts have been found all across prehistoric Europe. At Troy, for example, "eye-idols" occur continuously from the First Settlement (c. 3000-2500 B.C.) to the end of the Fifth Settlement (c. 1900-1800 B.C.).<sup>4</sup> The cult of the "Eye God-

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1. *The Birth of Tragedy* 1:145-146.

2. M. Mallowan, *Early Mesopotamia and Iran* (London, 1965), pp. 44-48.

3. For a similar opinion, see E. van Buren, "New Evidence Concerning an Eye-Divinity," *Iraq* 17 (1955), pp. 164-175.

dess" was surprisingly widespread, being attested as far North as Great Britain and as far East as Mohenjodaro.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the idols at the latter site, it has been claimed that they "have a high antiquity in India going back to well into the latter half of the third millennium B.C."<sup>6</sup> Gimbutas would trace the European artifacts to the Neolithic period: "The west European Eye Goddess of France, Spain, Portugal, and Great Britain is manifested in the stelae, figurines, and amulets of megalithic cultures dating from the 5th to the 3rd millennia B.C."<sup>7</sup>

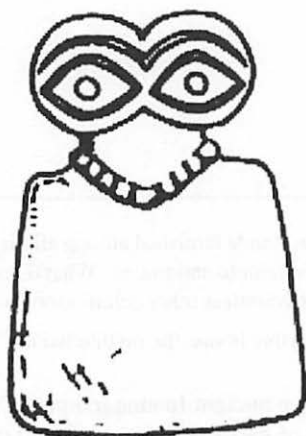


Figure One

Figure two shows various examples of the "Eye-goddess" from Neolithic Europe.<sup>8</sup> Apparent at once is the fact that the goddess' eyes are formed by the so-called "sun-signs" discussed in chapter five. In figure three the "eyes" are formed by radiating "suns."<sup>9</sup> Rosette-like "suns" elsewhere serve as the goddess' eyes.<sup>10</sup>

4. H. Frankfort, "Ishtar at Troy," *JNES* 8 (1949), pp. 194-200.

5. On the evidence from the latter site see M. Dhavalikar, "'Eye Goddesses' in India and their West Asian Parallels," *Anthropos* 60 (1965), pp. 533-540.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

7. M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco, 1989), p. 54.

8. Adapted from Figure 91 in *Ibid.*

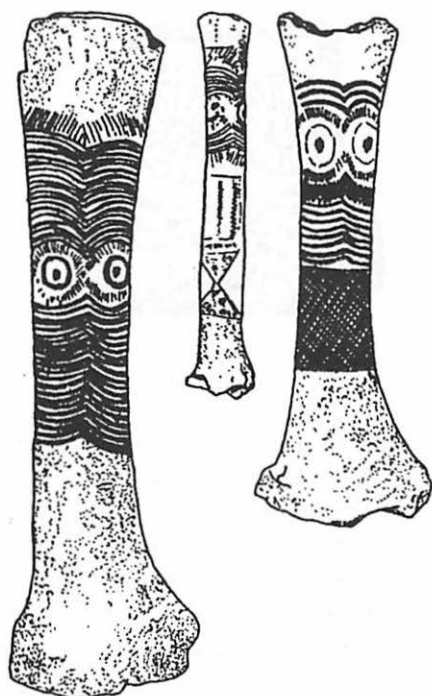


Figure two

That the Inanna-figurines from Tell Brak are analogous to those from prehistoric Europe is generally accepted. Gimbutas offered the following opinion: "The resemblance of figurines from the temple of Tel Brak...to stone idols of Spain and Portugal with the oculi-motif, is quite astonishing."<sup>11</sup>

9. Gimbutas' own term. *Ibid.*, p. 56, with reference to Figures 93 and 94.

10. In addition to the discussion by Gimbutas, see M. Green, *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe* (London, 1991), pp. 28, 38-39; O. G. S. Crawford, *The Eye Goddess* (London, 1957), p. 27.

11. M. Gimbutas, *op. cit.*, p. 54.



Figure three

Why cultures throughout the ancient world chose to represent their beloved mother goddess by an eye or by a figurine distinguished by concentric circles or "sun-signs" remains unexplained to this day. In our view, it is the goddess' celestial identification which provides the key to unlocking the mystery. Inanna, as we have seen, was identified with a planet which itself was compared to an "eye" by peoples around the globe. The Maya, as we have seen, knew Venus as *Nohoch ich*, "Great Eye."<sup>12</sup> The Polynesian peoples of Mangaia had an analogous name for Venus — *Tamata-nui*, "Great-eye."<sup>13</sup> Similar ideas are apparent among the Ringa-Ringaroo of Australia, who referred to Venus as *Mimungoona*, "Big Eye."<sup>14</sup>

It was in Mesoamerican iconography, perhaps, that the ocular symbolism of Venus reached its greatest expression. Figure four depicts a Classic Maya glyph known to signify Venus.<sup>15</sup> The resemblance to a pair of eyes is obvious and has frequently been noted by commentators, none of whom has suggested a plausible origin for the imagery.

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12. E. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman, 1975), p. 218.

13. M. Makemson, *The Morning Star Rises* (New Haven, 1941), p. 194.

14. E. Curr, *The Australian Race*, Vol. 2 (Melbourne, 1886), p. 351.

15. M. Closs, "Venus in the Maya World: Glyphs, Gods and Associated Astronomical Phenomena," in M. Robertson ed., *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque* (Monterey, 1979), p. 147.

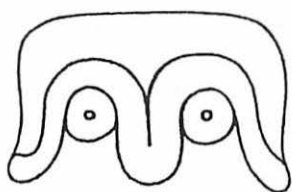


Figure four

A similar symbolism attaches to the planet Venus in Aztec lore. Thus, figure five appears ubiquitously in Aztec iconography and is commonly regarded as a Venus-sign:

"It has long been recognized that a lidded, circular eye framed by rays and lobes also containing eyes is almost certainly a star or planet and that it sometimes represents the planet Venus. It forms part of sky bands represented in codices of the Mixteca and of the Borgia Group as well as in the murals of Mitla in Oaxaca and of Tulum and Santa Rita. The eye-and-ray motif is also found in association with the sun disc, a motif that is also prominent at Chichen Itza."<sup>16</sup>

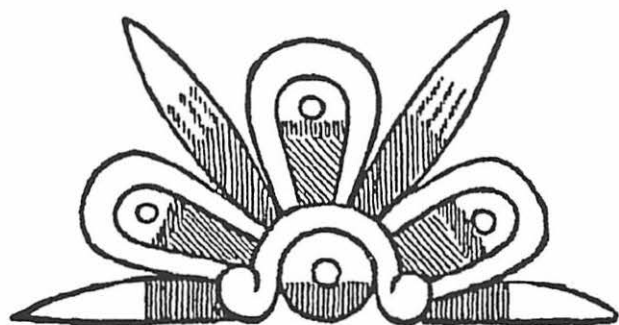


Figure five

16. V. Miller, "Star Warriors at Chichen Itza," in W. Hanks & D. Rice eds., *Word and Image in Maya Culture* (Salt Lake City, 1989), pp. 290-291.



Why the "eye-and-ray" motif should be associated with Venus or the sun disc is not readily apparent apart from the thesis defended here. Yet if the planet Venus formerly appeared as the central "eye" of the ancient sun god, as set forth in chapter five, the mystery is resolved at one stroke.



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"In religion, the great revelations and the great authorities—the founding fathers—belong to the past, and the older the authority, the greater it is. In science, unlike religion, the great revelations lie in the future; the coming generations are the authorities; and the pupil is greater than the master, if he has the gift to see things anew. All fruitful ideas have been conceived in the minds of the nonconformists, for whom the known was still unknown, and who often went back to begin where others passed by, sure of their way. The truth of today was the heresy of yesterday."<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Velikovsky

The Egyptian Hathor provides a prime example of the archetypal mother goddess. Already in the third millennium BCE, she was regarded as the mother of Horus, the Egyptian war-god believed to be incarnate in the pharaoh. Hathor's very name links her to the god, signifying "House of Horus."<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have hitherto been at a loss to explain the original nature of this great goddess, puzzled not only by her name but by her numerous seemingly incompatible characteristics. Alison Roberts, in a recent study of Hathor, offered the following complaint: "My initial problem was how to find any coherent pattern in the many representations of the goddess."<sup>3</sup>

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1. *Earth in Upheaval* (New York, 1955), pp. 270-271.

2. H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), p. 277.

For Roberts, as for the majority of scholars, Hathor personifies the sun:

"To understand her transformational role we must turn to another rhythm of time, the movement of the sun from dawn to dusk, rising in the eastern horizon each morning, crossing the sky at noon, and then sinking each evening into the west. As a solar goddess, the beneficent-destructive Hathor-Sekhmet participates in this daily rhythm which also links her qualities with the biological life-cycle of birth, maturity and death."<sup>4</sup>

But if Hathor represents the sun, how are we to understand her intimate relationships with Re or Horus, both of whom are typically identified with the sun by Egyptologists? Budge saw the difficulty here and suggested that Hathor represented a personification of the house in which the sun god (Horus) lived— i.e., the sky.<sup>5</sup> Erman offered a similar opinion: "Although this name, House of Horus, abode of the sun god, directly and unequivocally designates her as the sky..."<sup>6</sup>

It can be shown, in fact, that Hathor has nothing whatsoever to do with the sun. Nor, for that matter, does Horus. That Hathor was another celestial body altogether is confirmed by a survey of the numerous passages invoking the goddess in the Coffin Texts. There Hathor is repeatedly described as shining forth in the sky in the immediate vicinity of Re:

"I indeed have prepared a path to the place where Re is, to the place where Hathor is."<sup>7</sup>

A similar passage is the following:

"You have taken my soul and my spirit, my magic and shade with Re and Hathor to the place where Re is every day, to the place where Hathor is every day."<sup>8</sup>

That Hathor is, in fact, a celestial body is strongly suggested by those passages which describe her as shining in heaven. Witness the following passage: "Fair is

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3. A. Roberts, *Hathor Rising* (Devon, 1995), p. v.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

5. E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. 1 (New York, 1969), pp. 428-429.

6. A. Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London, 1907), p. 12.

7. *Coffin Texts* VI:78e (hereafter CT).

8. CT VI:80f.

your rising like the rising of Re, you shine like Hathor.”<sup>9</sup> Here, once again, Hathor is clearly distinguished from Re. But if Hathor cannot be understood by reference to the sun or the amorphous sky, with which celestial body is she to be identified?

A wealth of evidence indicates that the Egyptian goddess is to be identified with the planet Venus. From the standpoint of comparative religion, Hathor is virtually indistinguishable from the Sumerian planet-goddess Inanna. As Inanna/Venus was invoked as the “Lady of the Evening” so, too, is Hathor invoked as “Lady of the Evening,” hardly an apt epithet for the sun but perfectly appropriate for the “Evening Star.”<sup>10</sup> As Inanna/Venus is said to “rise” from the horizon so, too, is it said that “Hathor rises within the horizon.”<sup>11</sup> As Inanna was described as “rising” between the two gates of heaven so, also, was Hathor: “[The gates?] of the horizon [are thrown open(?)] for Hathor.”<sup>12</sup>

With respect to the last passage describing Hathor, it is significant to note that virtually identical language is employed to describe Venus’ epiphany in the Coffin Texts. Witness the following passage from Spell 722:

“To become the Morning Star. The paths of the Netherworld are opened for N, the gates of those who are in the horizon are opened for her, the beautiful star...N is the beautiful w<sup>c</sup> 3-star of gold which went up alone from the horizon...N is the Lone Star on the horizon, and her father Re<sup>c</sup> has given her the whole of the sky when he brightens.”<sup>13</sup>

Venus is here described as the daughter of Re. Doubtless it is no coincidence that “daughter of Re” was a popular epithet of Hathor.

## Hathor as the Eye of Re

The greatest strength of the Saturn-theory, in dramatic contrast to other schools of ancient myth, is that it leads directly to a seemingly endless series of tests, many of

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9. CT I:261b.

10. CT II:387a.

11. CT VI:48d.

12. CT VI:137.

13. It is noteworthy that the phrase w<sup>c</sup> 3-star, left untranslated by Faulkner, signifies the “torch-star.” Personal communication from Patrick De Smet, July 23, 2000.

which are immediately obvious given the basic outlines of the model. In accordance with our interpretation of the Re-sign, as set forth in chapter five, and remembering Venus' role as a mother goddess, it follows that the eye of Re must be identified with the mother goddess. And so it is that nearly every ancient Egyptian goddess is explicitly described as the "Eye of Re." Here Rundle Clark observed:

"The Eye is the commonest symbol in Egyptian thought and the strangest to us...One fact does stand out—the Egyptian Eye was always a symbol for the Great Goddess, whatever name she may have had in any particular instance."<sup>14</sup>

That the "Eye of Re" was somehow related to the planet Venus has been deduced by several Egyptologists, although they were at a complete loss to explain the logical rationale for the connection. Witness the following statement by Rudolf Anthes:

"Only the Eye of Re is identified as a heavenly body in a few sentences of the Pyramid Texts. We used to understand them as though the Eye of Re was identified as the sun, but a careful interpretation of them has unmistakably shown that the Eye of Re was the morning star."<sup>15</sup>

Yet if the Eye of Re is to be identified with the planet Venus, and if that planet was only recently involved in a series of spectacular catastrophes, as is deducible from the myths surrounding Inanna and her analogues,<sup>16</sup> it follows that the "Eye of Re" might be linked with catastrophic events of one sort or the other. And so it is that, already in the Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin Texts from the third millennium BCE, there appear various allusions to the terrifying time when the "Eye" went on a destructive rampage: "I am the fiery Eye of Horus which went forth terrible, Lady of slaughter...I am indeed she who shoots."<sup>17</sup>

Other passages recount the fire and devastation which accompanied the Eye's rampage: "The fire will go up, the flame will go up...the fiery one will be against them as the Eye of Re."<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere it is stated of the Eye: "Its flame is to the sky."<sup>19</sup>

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14. R. T. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1959), p. 218.

15. R. Anthes, "Mythology in Ancient Egypt," in S. Kramer ed., *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (New York, 1961), pp. 89-90.

16. In addition to the numerous articles by Talbott and myself, see the lucid argument of Bernard Newgrosh in "The Case for Catastrophe in Historical Times," *Kronos* XI:1 (1985), pp. 3-22.

17. CT IV:98.

Another passage speaks of the hair raised from the Eye, a strikingly appropriate image if the reference was to a planet presenting a comet-like apparition: "I raised up the hair from the Sacred Eye at the time of its wrath."<sup>20</sup> Egyptian pictures of the raging Eye, in accordance with this interpretation, depict an eye with a hairy tail (see figure one).<sup>21</sup>



Figure one

The wrath of the "Eye," in the final analysis, is simply the wrath of the planet-goddess in her terrible aspect.<sup>22</sup> An early example of this theme can be found in an Egyptian tale known as the "Destruction of Mankind," wherein Re dispatches Hathor to wage war upon his enemies:

"Let go forth thine Eye, let it destroy for thee those who blaspheme with wickedness, not an eye can precede it in resistance...when it goeth forth in the form of Hathor. Went forth then this goddess, she slew mankind on the mountain."<sup>23</sup>

Egyptian ritual likewise represented Hathor as a warring Eye. One text invokes the goddess as follows: "The eye of Re...the fire-spreading goddess who spreads fire on the enemies."<sup>24</sup> Yet another passage reads: "The Eye of Re, lady of heaven...daughter of Re, who came forth from his body."<sup>25</sup>

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18. CT V:264.

19. CT III:343.

20. CT IV:232ff. In the *Papyrus of Ani*, similarly, it is written: "I raise up the hair at the time of storms in the sky...It is the right Eye of Ra in its raging against him after he hath made it to depart." See E. Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London, 1901), pp. 36-37.

21. Adapted from R. T. Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

23. E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. I (New York, 1969), p. 392.

24. J. Bourghouts, "The Evil Eye of Apopis," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 (1973), p. 134.

In addition to being identified as a celestial body—the lady of heaven and daughter of the ancient sun-god—Hathor as the warring “Eye” was expressly compared to a fire-breathing dragon: “The cobra-snake of Re...who came forth from him...who burns the enemy of Re with her heat...The Eye of Re...She is the flaming goddess.”<sup>26</sup>

As the uraeus serpent, Hathor is not only described as a “Lady of the Sky” but also as a raging “Lady of Fire.” Witness the following series of epithets:

“Exalted is your power, O Burning One, O Sated One, O Mighty One, Powerful, Skilful of Flames, Lady of the Sky, Mistress of the Two Lands, O Eye of Horus, and his guide...Lady of Eternity, Fiery One, O Red One, whose Flame burns, Serpent Uraeus, who guides the people, O Lady of Fire, O Scaring One, O Devourer, O Scorching One...”<sup>27</sup>

There is simply no denying that descriptions of Hathor’s incendiary rampage mirror descriptions of Inanna’s celestial war-mongering. Recall the following passage from “The Exaltation of Inanna”:

“Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the land, When you roar at the earth like Thunder, no vegetation can stand up to you. A flood descending from its mountain, Oh foremost one, you are the Inanna of heaven and earth! Raining the fanned fire down upon the nation...”<sup>28</sup>

Like Hathor, Inanna is described as “dragon-like” and as raining forth fire from heaven. Indeed, the fundamental affinity of the two goddesses is evident at every turn. As Inanna/Ishtar was invoked as the “terrifying dragon of the gods,”<sup>29</sup> so too did Hathor inspire terror as the fire-spitting uraeus serpent. Thus, a hymn at Philae invokes the serpentine Hathor as “the Great One shining on the brow of her father, the glorious one who causes fear of her father.”<sup>30</sup> (In her role as the uraeus, Hathor was said to have once resided on the forehead of Re.<sup>31</sup>)

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25. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

27. A. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

28. W. Hallo & J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, 1968), p. 15.

29. B. Foster, *Before the Muses*, Vol. 1 (Bethesda, 1993), p. 240.

30. A. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Of the myth of Hathor as the warring eye, Erman lamented that "we must abandon any hope of understanding the original."<sup>32</sup> The symbolism of the Eye-goddess will forever remain impenetrable and more than a little ludicrous apart from the thesis defended here, whereby the "Eye" is identified with the planet Venus. The Egyptian goddess' epithet "Eye of Re" derives from the fact that Hathor/Venus was once positioned on the face of the ancient sun-god, whereupon it was viewed as that god's "eye." The same interpretation holds for the aforementioned references whereby Hathor is set upon the face or forehead of Re.<sup>33</sup>

Hathor's appearance as a raging, hairy "Eye" raining fire from the sky commemorates a specific phase in the recent history of Venus, wherein the planet-goddess assumed the form of a comet-like object while filling the skies with fiery exhalations. As the "Eye of Re," Hathor could transform herself into a fire-spitting dragon. Yet the planet Venus was said to have undergone a similar metamorphosis in form, as we have seen in the cases of Inanna and Nehanda.

The logic applied here to the example provided by the "Eye of Re" might be applied to any one of a hundred sacred symbols associated with Venus or the ancient sun-god, all of which would lead to the same conclusion: Venus only recently moved upon a radically different orbit, one which brought it perilously close to the Earth, Mars, and Saturn. As a result of close and spectacular encounters with these planetary bodies, Venus came to be viewed as a warrior-goddess whose fiery rampage brought the world to the brink of destruction.

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31. CT VI:82h. "O Re and Hathor, take my soul, my spirit and my shade with you, may I establish your [i.e., Hathor's] ornament on the vertex of Re."

32. A. Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London, 1907), p. 28.

33. The question as to how the Eye-goddess came to be viewed as a rearing serpent associated with the crown of the Egyptian king will be reserved for a future volume in this series.



## *Venus and the Celestial Hereafter*

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"All truth goes through three stages: first it is ridiculed; then it is violently opposed; finally it is accepted as self-evident." Arthur Schopenhauer

If there is one thing that stands out about the Egyptian civilization, it is an obsessive preoccupation with death and the means whereby immortality might be achieved. Thus it is that a dominant theme in the ancient Egyptian Pyramid and Coffin Texts was the king's survival of death and transmigration to the stars. Indeed, the primary purpose for including the Pyramid Texts in the tomb of the king was to aid him (or his soul) in ascending to the Elysian Fields in heaven. As the oldest body of religious texts in the world, the Pyramid Texts represent an invaluable source for reconstructing the celestial landscape as it was understood in the third millennium BCE.

The goal of the Egyptian dead, according to numerous passages in the Pyramid Texts, is to ascend to heaven and join the entourage of Re, the ancient sun god. Various means are available to the deceased king in order to attain this objective. One hymn suggests that he follow a road to the "horizon," "to the place where Re is."<sup>1</sup>

A recurring theme in these texts finds the king mounting a stairway or some other contrivance in order to reach the kingdom of the sun. A typical passage is the fol-

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1. *Pyramid Texts* 756 (hereafter PT).

lowing: "Stairs to the sky are laid for him that he may ascend thereon to the sky."<sup>2</sup> Various passages relate that the king is to mount a ladder (mꜣꜥt) which serves as a stairway to heaven.<sup>3</sup> By climbing this ladder, the dead king will come to join Re in the Elysian Fields. Spell 769 in the Coffin Texts illustrates this idea:

"I am Horus; give me the ladder which you gave to my father, so that I may ascend on it to the sky and escort [Re]..."

A similar passage is the following: "I ascend on this ladder which my father Re made for me."<sup>4</sup>

As the two previous passages illustrate, the king was identified with the son of the ancient sun-god, typically with Horus. Yet the king was also identified as a star, particularly in the form of Horus as "Morning Star." It is as a star that the king is implored to mount the ladder in order to join Re: "The King is a star in the sky among the gods...bring to the king [the ladder] which Khnum has made that the King may ascend on it to the sky and escort Re in the sky."<sup>5</sup>

As I have documented elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> Horus is to be identified with the planet Mars. The Egyptian god's epithet "Morning Star" naturally recalls Pawnee lore, where Mars was known as "Morning Star."

As Hathor is virtually indistinguishable from the Sumerian Inanna, Horus offers a striking analogue to the Sumerian war-god Nergal, whose identification with the red planet is well-known and attested already in the Old Babylonian period. As Horus is described as climbing the ladder of heaven—CT 769, quoted earlier—so, too, is Nergal described as climbing to heaven along a towering ladder.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the planet Mars is described as climbing a luminous ladder to heaven in aboriginal lore from South America confirms that we are dealing with a very ancient and archetypal mythical motif, one directly inspired by celestial events.<sup>8</sup> Given the

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2. PT 1108.

3. See the discussion in H. Blok, "Zur altägyptischen Vorstellung der Himmelsleiter," *Acta Orientalia* 6 (1928), pp. 257-269.

4. PT 390.

5. PT 1586.

6. E. Cochrane, "Sothis and Morning Star in the Pyramid Texts," *Aeon* 3:5 (1994), pp. 77-94.

7. S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1991), p. 171.

notable absence of ladder-like structures in the current skies, the question arises: How are we to understand ancient references to a ladder leading to the ancient sun-god?

As I have documented,<sup>9</sup> ancient rock art from around the globe depicts ladder-like structures emanating from the so-called "sun"-images (see figure one).<sup>10</sup> Such images would appear to commemorate a unique phase in the history of the polar configuration, one which saw the pillar of heaven assume a helical, ladder-like form.<sup>11</sup> If so, ancient rock art serves to complement and illuminate the widespread myth of a ladder associated with the ancient sun-god.

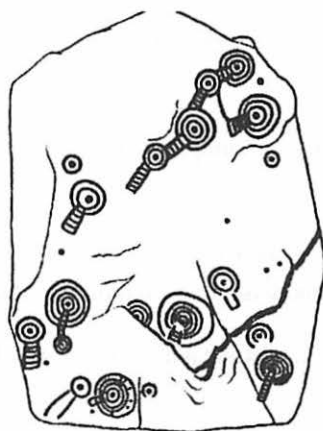


Figure one

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8. M. de. Civrieux, *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle* (San Francisco, 1980), pp. 113-114.

9. E. Cochrane, "The Stairway to Heaven," *Aeon* 5:1 (1997), pp. 69-78.

10. These images, from a rock face at Ilkley in Yorkshire, England, are adapted from *Ibid.*, p. 75.

11. This phase forms the subject of the next book in this series.

## The Circumpolar Stars

Inextricably interlinked with the belief in a celestial hereafter centered on Re is a desire to sit amongst the circumpolar stars in the northern heavens. Thus, a common theme in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts finds the dead king being implored to ascend and join the circumpolar stars in the North. A typical passage is the following: "May you go to those northern gods the Circumpolar Stars."<sup>12</sup>

Similar passages follow:

"O King, you have not died the death, you have come to life among them, the spirits, even the Circumpolar Stars."<sup>13</sup>

"I am back to back with those northern gods of the sky, the Circumpolar Stars, therefore I shall not perish."<sup>14</sup>

"I ascend to the sky among the Circumpolar Stars, my sister is Sothis, my guide is the Morning Star."<sup>15</sup>

"The King's father Atum takes the King's arm and sets the King at the head of yonder gods who are excellent and wise, the Circumpolar Stars."<sup>16</sup>

"You shall set the King as a magistrate among the spirits, the Circumpolar Stars in the north of the sky."<sup>17</sup>

"May you ascend as Horus of the Duat at the head of the Circumpolar Stars."<sup>18</sup>

As in the ascent to the kingdom of Re, a celestial ladder is said to aid the deceased king in joining the Circumpolar Stars:

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12. PT 818.

13. Nt 776-777.

14. PT 1080.

15. PT 1123.

16. PT 997.

17. PT 1220.

18. PT 1301.

"A ladder to the sky shall be put together for you and Nut will extend her hands towards you, you shall navigate on the Winding Waterway and sail in the eight-boat. These two crews of the Imperishable Stars and the Unwearying Stars shall navigate you, they shall pilot and tow you over the District of the Waters with ropes of iron."<sup>19</sup>

Numerous passages speak of the dead king ascending to the Field of Offerings (*ḥtpw*) in the sky, the latter described as being in the immediate vicinity of the sun-god. Once again it is Horus who serves as the exemplary model for the deceased king:

"The reed-floats of the sky are set down for Horus that he might cross to Re at the horizon...The reed-floats of the sky are set down for me, for I am Horus of the Gods, and I will cross indeed to Re at the horizon. I take to myself my throne which is in the Field of Rushes, and I descend to the southern region of the Field of Offerings."<sup>20</sup>

Yet the Field of Offerings is explicitly described as lying within the circumpolar region: "Cross the sky to the Field of Rushes, make your abode in the Field of Offerings, among the Circumpolar Stars, the followers of Osiris."<sup>21</sup> The same idea is apparent in the following passage: "The King has gone to the great island in the middle of the Field of Offerings on which the swallow-gods alight: the swallows are the Circumpolar Stars."<sup>22</sup>

How are we to explain the fact that the Egyptian hereafter is said to be located near Re at the "horizon" but also amongst the Circumpolar Stars? Numerous scholars have noted the apparent contradiction but few have attempted to explain it. Jan Assmann offered the following observation:

"Those formulations of the transition to the next world where the idea of a 'physical passage' predominates speak of a path, along which the deceased must proceed. Such texts describe the aspired higher sphere of existence principally as a 'sojourn' in one specific far off place. The Pyramid Texts, our oldest corpus of funerary literature, locate this eternal abode in the northern sky."<sup>23</sup>

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19. PT 58.

20. PT 1085-1087.

21. PT 749.

22. PT 1216.

Yet the same scholar goes on to speak of the Old Kingdom's "exclusively cosmic conception of a hereafter ruled by the sun-god Re."<sup>24</sup> Absent from Assmann's learned analysis is any discussion as to how one can have it both ways; i.e., how can the eternal abode be located in the northern sky and yet be ruled by Re when the current sun never approaches the circumpolar region?

The simplest solution to this glaring anomaly is to postulate a conflation of two originally separate and contradictory views regarding the hereafter, one associated with the northernmost (polar) regions of the sky and the other with the eastern horizon and the sun, an opinion expressed by more than one Egyptologist.<sup>25</sup> Close analysis of the relevant passages, however, will not support this solution for, as we have documented above, the ancient sun-god and the Circumpolar Stars are invoked in such a context that their original connection is assured.

The intimate relationship between Re and the polar region is also evident from the fact that these very same "Circumpolar Stars" are elsewhere said to accompany the sun-god on his circumambulation about the sky, serving as the oarsmen of his day-bark. Witness the following passage:

"My father ascends to the sky among the gods who are in the sky; he stands at the Great Polar Region and learns the speech of the sun-folk. Re finds you on the banks of the sky as a waterway-traveller who is in the sky... Be pure; occupy your seat in the Bark of Re, row over the sky and mount up to the distant ones; row with the Imperishable [Circumpolar] Stars..."<sup>26</sup>

One could hardly ask for a more explicit statement. The dead king ascends to the "Great Polar Region," whereupon he learns the speech of the sun-folk and rows in the Bark of Re together with the Circumpolar Stars. The same idea is apparent in a number of other passages:

"If you [the sun-god] prevent the king from coming to the place where you are, your crew of the Circumpolar Stars will be prevented from rowing you."<sup>27</sup>

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23. J. Assmann, "Death and Initiation in the Funerary Religion of Ancient Egypt," in W. Simpson ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), p. 143.

24. *Ibid.*

25. See the discussion in A. Badaway, "The Stellar Destiny of Pharaoh and the So-Called Air-Shafts of Cheops' Pyramid," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 10 (1964), pp. 197ff.

26. PT 1168-1171.

Also relevant is the following passage:

"The King embarks like Re upon the shores of the Winding Waterway, the King is rowed by the Unwearying Stars and he governs the Circumpolar Stars."<sup>28</sup>

Such passages offer compelling evidence that Re and the Circumpolar Stars were thought to reside in the same general location in the sky.

Much of the confusion with regards to the original import of the ancient Egyptian descriptions of the celestial landscape is caused by translators who, quite naturally, attempt to forcefit the hieroglyphic language to the familiar sky. A case in point is the Egyptian word *ah*t, conventionally translated as "horizon" or "eastern side of the sky." Deriving from a root /jht, signifying "light" or "to shine forth," the term *ah*t denotes the site of the ancient sun-god's glorious daily epiphany—specifically the two-peaked mountain over which the celestial body was wont to appear. The hieroglyph signifying the *ah*t confirms this understanding, showing the sign for Re atop the sign for mountain.<sup>29</sup> Yet as we have seen in our discussion of Shamash's epiphany, the twin-peaked mountain has absolutely no relation to the eastern "horizon." Rather, it denotes the twin-peaked mountain in the polar region.

Given the dead king's goal of ascending to join Re, it is not surprising to find that numerous passages in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts speak of an ascent to the *ah*t. Evident throughout, however, is a curious juxtaposition of the *ah*t with the northernmost regions of the sky. Witness the following passage:

"The reed-floats of the sky are set in place for me, that I may cross by means of them to Re at the horizon [*ah*t]. I ferry across in order that I may stand on the east side of the sky in its northern region among the Imperishable Stars, who stand at their staffs and sit (?) at their East."<sup>30</sup>

Yet who among us would describe the sun-god as appearing on the "eastern side of the sky in its northern region among the Circumpolar Stars"? The two terms, "east-

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27. PT 1438-1439.

28. PT 2172-73.

29. J. Assmann, "Horizont," *LÄ* 2 (1977), col. 3.

30. PT 1000. Faulkner elsewhere translates the same passage as follows: "The King ferries across that he may stand on the eastern side of the sky in its northern region among the Circumpolar Stars."

ern side of the sky" and "northern region among the Circumpolar Stars" are mutually exclusive.

The Pyramid Texts elsewhere describe the Circumpolar Stars as inhabiting the region associated with the ancient sun god's daily epiphany. In one passage, for example, the Circumpolar Stars are said to reside in the *aḥt*:

"The King guides the Imperishable Stars. He ferries across to the Fields of Rushes, and those who are in the horizon row him, those who are in the firmament convey him."<sup>31</sup>

Such passages should raise a red flag that the Egyptian word *aḥt* has little relation to the modern concept "horizon."

How the Circumpolar Stars ever came to be associated with Re, much less with his day-bark or the *aḥt*, is not obvious and, in any case, remains unexplained. For if Re is to be identified with the current sun, as all Egyptologists would have us believe, and if the *jḥmw-sk* stars are to be identified with the Circumpolar Stars, such a situation is clearly impossible, as the current sun does not frequent the polar region and the Circumpolar Stars are not visible during the day. But if the *aḥt* originally had reference to the twin-peaked World Mountain associated with a polar sun, as outlined in chapter seven, it would be possible for the "sun" to appear in the company of the Circumpolar Stars.<sup>32</sup> That the World Mountain was indeed the original celestial reference of the *aḥt* is confirmed by the fact that the ancient sun-god was believed to both "rise" and "set" from this site,<sup>33</sup> the very idea we found attached to the Sumerian World Mountain, Mashu. The same conclusion is consistent with the fact that the word *aḥt* could elsewhere be used to signify the far North.<sup>34</sup>

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31. PT 374c. See here the discussion in W. Barta, "Funktion und Lokalisierung der Zirkumpolarsterne in den Pyramidentexten," ZÄS 107 (1980), p. 2.

32. The "Circumpolar Stars," it should be noted, are to be identified with satellites present during the period of the polar configuration, not with any current polar stars.

33. J. Assmann, "Death and Initiation in the Funerary Religion of Ancient Egypt," in W. Simpson ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), pp. 136-137. See also R. Hannig, *Die Sprache der Pharaonen* (Mainz, 1995), p. 13.

34. J. Assmann, "Horizont," LÄ 2 (1977), col. 4.



## The Mansion of Horus

A key to understanding the Egyptian beliefs in a transmigration to the celestial hereafter is provided by those passages which speak of traveling to a mansion of Horus in the sky. The king is implored to ascend to the "Mansion of Horus":

"[The doors of the sky] are opened [for you, the doors of the firmament are thrown open for you...the Mansion of] Horus which is in the sky...He shall ascend to the Mansion of Horus which is in the sky."<sup>35</sup>

The same idea is apparent in the following utterance:

"As for any god who shall take my hand in the sky, And shall betake himself to the Mansion of Horus which is in the firmament."<sup>36</sup>

Such passages would appear to confirm the view—voiced by Kurt Sethe,<sup>37</sup> Rudolf Anthes,<sup>38</sup> and others—that the "Mansion of Horus" constituted the goal of the king's ascent.

How, then, are we to understand this "Mansion of Horus"? Some scholars have sought to see in it a not-so-veiled reference to the goddess Hathor, whose name signifies "House of Horus." Thus Lesko writes: "In the Pyramid Texts we find what must be a reference to the goddess as a personification of Horus's home: 'He shall ascend to the Mansion of Horus which is in the sky' (Utt. 485)."<sup>39</sup>

Others have shied away from this interpretation. In the index to *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, for example, Faulkner writes that the "Mansion of Horus" is not the goddess.<sup>40</sup>

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35. PT 1025-7.

36. PT 1327.

37. K. Sethe, *Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den altägyptischen Pyramidentexten*, Vol. 5 (Hamburg, 1961), p. 247.

38. R. Anthes, "Das Sonnenauge in den Pyramidentexten," *ZÄS* 86 (1961), p. 11, writes "The 'Haus des Horus' dementsprechend das colaufige Ziel seines Aufsteiges ist."

39. B. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman, 1999), pp. 82-83.

40. R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Warminster, 1969), p. 322.

That the "Mansion of Horus" is to be identified with Hathor is further suggested by those passages which beseech the king to climb to the sky in order to reach the goddess, thereby paralleling the passages speaking of an ascent to the "Mansion of Horus." Upon ascending to the sky, the dead king hopes to be greeted by Hathor:

"I have grown on incense, I have climbed up on the sunbeams; O Hathor, give me your hand. Ascending to the sky."<sup>41</sup>

The same idea is apparent in the following spells:

"O Hathor, may your hand be given to me, and may I be taken to the sky."<sup>42</sup>

"The doors of the sky are opened because of your goodness; may you ascend and see Hathor."<sup>43</sup>

"I am Horus; give me the ladder which you gave to my father, so that I may ascend on it to the sky and escort [Re]...As for any god who shall oppose [himself] to me, he shall have no bread...he shall have no soul, he shall not go up to Hathor who is in the sky."

In his translation of the Coffin Texts, Faulkner compares this latter passage with the aforementioned 1026/7 from the Pyramid Texts, noting that the "original *Hwt-hr* 'Mansion of Horus' has to be taken here as the name of the goddess."<sup>44</sup>

If the goal of the deceased king was to ascend to the "Mansion of Horus/Hathor" in the sky, a logical question to ask is where was this mansion to be found? Here the Egyptian texts leave no room for doubt: it was located in the immediate vicinity of Re. Yet Hathor was also said to be found in the northern regions of the sky! Thus, in one passage Hathor introduces herself as follows:

"I am Hathor, mistress of the northern sky, who strengthened the bonds of the wakeful on that night when the earth quaked (?) and...was among the mourners. I am Isis whom Nut bore, who displays her beauty, who puts together her power and who lifts up Re to the Day-bark."<sup>45</sup>

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41. CT IV:52c.

42. CT V:159c.

43. CT I:181b.

44. R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, Vol. II (Warminster, 1977), p. 300.

Here, once again, we find a curious juxtaposition of "North" and "East," Hathor being described as the "mistress of the northern sky" but also as intimately connected with Re. Such passages raise a host of insuperable problems for Egyptologists attempting to interpret the ancient traditions by reference to the current sky. For where is the "Mansion" of Horus/Hathor to be found in today's circumpolar heavens? Yet if Hathor was Venus, as outlined in the previous chapter, and if Venus only recently adorned the "face" of the polar sun (Re/Saturn), the Egyptian traditions make perfect sense.

## The Ascent to Heaven in Comparative Mythology

At first sight, the Egyptian traditions of the hereafter strike the modern reader as fantastic in nature, what with their references to "ladders" in heaven, the "gates" of Re, the "Mansion of Horus," etc. Yet the fact that analogous traditions will be found elsewhere, far removed from the Old Kingdom in time and space, supports the view that the ancient Egyptian conceptions of the otherworld are historical in nature. The idea of a soul-ladder stretching from earth to heaven, for example, is apparently universal in extent.<sup>46</sup>

Particularly relevant here is a sacred tradition of the Tsimshian Indians from British Columbia, quoted earlier:

"The sky is a beautiful open country. It is reached through the hole in the sky, which opens and closes...The sky may also be reached by means of a ladder which extends from the mountains to the sky...After reaching the sky, the visitor finds himself on a trail which leads to the house of the Sun chief. In this house the Sun lives with his daughter...The Sun's daughter is the Evening Star."<sup>47</sup>

In Tsimshian cosmology, as in the Egyptian, the visitor to heaven accomplishes his ascent by means of a ladder. The visitor must follow a path which leads to the house of the ancient sun-god, as in Egyptian lore. Most important, however, is the reference to the planet Venus as the "Evening Star," said to reside together with the Sun. If our identification of Hathor with Venus is to be admitted, we have yet

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45. CT 177ff.

46. See the discussion in J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1923), pp. 228-230; M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 487-494.

47. F. Boas, "Tsimshian Mythology," *ARBAE* 31 (1916), pp. 453-454.

another precise parallel between the two traditions, the Egyptian goddess being commonly invoked as "the daughter of Re."

The intimate connection of Venus with the land of the dead, apparent in Tsimshian lore and deducible from Egyptian descriptions of the ascent to heaven, is archetypal in nature and attested around the world. Thus, the same idea is shared by the Australian Aborigines who, like the ancient Egyptians, were avid skywatchers. They, too, held that a chief's spirit rose to the heavens or "Skyworld" after death and that it was possible to ascend to that sacred place by means of a ladder or tree. Witness the following tradition, quoted in an earlier chapter:

"The Morning Star was also an important sign to the Aborigines who arose at early dawn to begin their hunting. It, too, was personified and frequently associated with death. Arnhem Land legends identify the home of the morning star, Barnumbir, as Bralgu, the Island of the Dead...In Arnhem Land, because of this connection, the morning star ceremony is an important part of the ritual for the Dead...When a person dies, his/her spirit is believed to be conducted by the star to Bralgu, its last resting place."<sup>48</sup>

In comparative mythology, as in a court of law, it is the corroboration of independent testimony on matters of specific or unusual detail that makes the most compelling case. How, apart from the thesis defended here, are we to understand the Aboriginal tradition of Venus as governess of the Island of the Dead? Why would this star, out of thousands of twinkling possibilities, be selected as the longed-for resting place of the transmigrating soul?

## Summary

In the present chapter exploring ancient Egyptian conceptions of the celestial hereafter we have shown that it was the fervent desire of the deceased king to ascend to Hathor or, alternately, to the "Mansion of Horus which is in the sky." The Mansion in question, nowhere to be found in the modern heavens, is but a sacred epithet for the planet Venus which, as Hathor, was identified with the soul's final resting place. Analogous traditions associating Venus with the celestial hereafter have been provided from Australia as well as the New World.

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48. R. Haynes, "Aboriginal Astronomy," *Australian Journal of Astronomy* 4:3 (1992), p. 134.

If we view the Egyptian traditions from the vantage point of the Saturn theory, Re's circumpolar location and Hathor's singular relationship to Horus receive immediate clarification. During the period associated with the polar configuration, Saturn and Earth shared a common axis of rotation with the result that the gas giant, as Re, appeared fixed in the northern circumpolar heavens. Accompanying Saturn/Re at the time, and also located along the shared polar axis, were the planets Venus and Mars, the latter planet being closer to the Earth. Terrestrial viewers looking to the northern heavens saw the red planet nestled squarely within the larger Venus (see the illustration on the back cover), both planets being set near the center of the ancient sun. Hathor's name, signifying "House of Horus," likely commemorates this memorable celestial situation whereby Venus appeared to encircle or "house" the red planet.

A Coffin Text finds the deceased king praying: "O all you gods who are in sky and earth...prepare a path for my soul, my spirit and my shade in the retinues of Re and of Hathor for all eternity."<sup>49</sup> This plea, like countless others, confirms Hathor's celestial nature and intimate relationship to Re and the hereafter. A related text finds the king offering the following plea: "You have taken my soul and my spirit, my magic and shade with Re and Hathor to the place where Re is every day, to the place where Hathor is every day."<sup>50</sup> Such a prayer finds its rationale in the fact that Hathor, as the planet Venus, was to be found in the very same region of the sky as Re, the ancient sun-god—and not periodically, but every single day.

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49. CT 79c.

50. CT 80f.

## *Towards a Natural History of Mythology*

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"What is to be made of this mass of nonsense? How can all this have a meaning, a motivation, a function, or at least a structure? The question of whether myths have an authentic content can never be put in positive terms."<sup>1</sup>

Why should anyone care about ancient myth? The answer, quite simply, is that for untold centuries myth served as the primary means of recording and communicating man's fundamental ideas regarding the nature of the cosmos and the sacred. In this sense, ancient myth represents an intellectual heirloom encapsulating the history of our species and is thus a ripe field of study for all students of evolutionary psychology. If, as appears to be the case, myth also preserves important clues for reconstructing the recent history of our solar system, its study becomes all the more essential.

The attempt to apply scientific methods to decipher the content of myth is still in its infancy. The roots of comparative mythology can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries, when the likes of Samuel Bochart, Bernard de Fontanelle, and Sir William Jones were composing their works.<sup>2</sup> These scholars documented the fact that striking similarities exist amongst the mythologies of the world's best known

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1. P. Vayne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?* (Chicago, 1988), p. 2.

2. For a survey of early scholarship in the field, see B. Feldman & R. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860* (Bloomington, 1972).

cultures. It was in the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, that real progress was made towards developing a science of mythology, with numerous attempts being made to reduce the phantasmagoria of ancient mythology to a common denominator, frequently a nature-allegory of some sort.<sup>3</sup> Famous examples include Müller's sun-god, Kuhn's storm-god, and Mannhardt's fertility-daemon. Müller's view of the wellsprings of ancient myth is captured in the following quote:

"I look upon the sunrise and sunset, on the daily return of day and night, on the battle between light and darkness, on the whole solar drama in all its details that is acted every day, every month, every year, in heaven and in earth, as the principal subject of early mythology."<sup>4</sup>

A comparative philologist by training, Müller was able to show that the various Indo-European languages belonged to a common stock, and thus it was to be expected that they might preserve a certain mythological heritage as well. The Sanskrit Dyaus was cognate with the Greek Zeus, for example, attesting to the worship of the sky-god during the period prior to the migration of the respective peoples from their original homeland.

Although Müller's philological methods would prove useful for subsequent generations of scholars exploring myth, with the dawning of the twentieth century his "solar" interpretations gradually fell out of fashion, to be replaced by the grand interpretations inspired by such figures as Frazer and Freud. James Frazer, like other members of what came to be known as the Cambridge school—Jane Harrison, A. B. Cook, Gilbert Murray, F. M. Cornford, among others—sought to understand the content of myth by reference to archaic ritual. According to this view, myth was to be interpreted as the spoken or written correlate of things done in ritual. The myth of Osiris' death and dismemberment, for example, provided the logical rationale for an Egyptian harvest-ritual commemorating the annual death of the vegetation-spirit.<sup>5</sup> For Frazer, myth had no objective meaning *per se*, being "a fiction devised to explain an old custom, of which the real meaning and origin had been forgotten."<sup>6</sup>

Stanley Hyman summarized the ritualists' view of myth as follows:

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3. See the discussion in J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (London, 1989), pp. 13-20.

4. *Lectures on the Science of Language* (New York, 1869), p. 537.

5. J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough Vol. 4: Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (New York, 1961), pp. 97-114.

6. *Ibid.*, (London, 1915), p. 153.

"If we keep clearly in mind that myth tells a story sanctioning a rite, it is obvious that it neither means nor explains anything; that it is not science but a form of independent experience, analogous to literature."<sup>7</sup>

In stark contrast to Müller and the previous generation of scholars who had viewed myth as a sort of primitive science explaining the natural world, Sigmund Freud emphasized myth's symbolic function, arguing that it was more concerned with the psychic world within than the natural world without.<sup>8</sup> Myth, according to Freud, involves the projection of unconscious images and symbols onto the natural world. Universal images such as the fire-breathing dragon or warrior-hero, according to this view, derive from unconscious factors and thus have no objective counterpart in the real world.

Although Freud himself published relatively little on myth, his psychoanalytic writings exerted a seminal influence upon such scholars as Carl Jung, Geza Roheim, and Otto Rank, each of whom devoted major studies to uncovering the psychological determinants of myth. The writings of Jung and Rank, in turn, exerted a formative influence upon the likes of Joseph Campbell and Carl Kerényi, whose respective works have done so much to bring the subject of mythology to the forefront of public consciousness.

Alas, the schemes of Frazer and Freud were fated to be replaced as well, and in recent years the theories advanced by Georges Dumézil, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Mircea Eliade have dominated the field of comparative mythology. The first two scholars were heavily influenced by the pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim, who sought to establish a correlation between the central themes of myth and underlying cultural patterns.<sup>9</sup> Dumézil, for example, sought the origin of particular mythological themes in the tripartite structure of ancient Indo-European society. According to this interpretation, the behavior and functions of the warrior-class that distinguished ancient Indo-European cultures account for the fascinating mythol-

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7. S. Hyman, "The Ritual View of Myth and the Mythic," in T. Sebeok ed., *Myth: A Symposium* (Bloomington, 1965), p. 146.

8. See here the valuable discussion by R. Segal, "In Defense of Mythology: The History of Modern Theories of Myth," *Annals of Scholarship* 1 (1980), pp. 10-17.

9. C. Lyttleton, *The New Comparative Mythology* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 4 holds the fundamental Durkheimian principle to be as follows: "That the persons, places, events, and situations that received expression in myths are inevitably representations of important social and cultural realities."



ogy associated with heroes of the warrior-type (Heracles, Indra, Cuchulainn, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, looked to the structure and function of the human brain to explain the origin of societal patterns together with their attendant mythological motifs.<sup>11</sup> The myth of Oedipus thus owes little to the projection of forbidden sexual urges, *ala* Freud, tracing instead to the universal tendency of human beings to think in terms of binary operations, such as black/white, good/evil, heaven/hell.<sup>12</sup> The function of myth, according to the French anthropologist, is to provide a logical form of mediation between real or apparent contradictions.<sup>13</sup>

For Eliade, myth represents a sacred history describing the origin of the world and mankind's various cultural institutions. Eliade made a point of emphasizing myth's central function in ancient (and so-called primitive) cultures:

"One fact strikes us immediately: in such societies the myth is thought to express the *absolute truth*, because it narrates a *sacred history*; that is, a transhuman experience revelation which took place at the dawn of the Great Time, in the holy time of the beginnings (*in illo tempore*). Being *real* and *sacred*, the myth becomes exemplary, and consequently *repeatable*, for it serves as a model, and by the same token as a justification, for all human actions. In other words, a myth is a *true history* of what came to pass at the beginning of Time, and one which provides the pattern for human behaviour...Clearly, what we are dealing with here is a complete reversal of values; whilst current language confuses the myth with 'fables', a man of the traditional societies sees it as the *only valid revelation of reality*."<sup>14</sup>

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10. G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970). For a survey of Dumézil's extensive writings see C. Lyttleton, *op. cit.*

11. "[Myths] teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate, they help us lay bare their inner workings and clarify the *raison d'être* of beliefs, customs...and most importantly, they make it possible to discover operational modes of the human mind, which have remained so constant over the centuries, and are so widespread...that we can assume them to be fundamental and can seek to find them in other societies and in other areas of mental life, where their presence is not suspected." Quoted from I. Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History* (London, 1987), p. 132.

12. C. Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in T. Sebeok ed., *Myth: A Symposium* (London, 1965), pp. 81-106.

13. In Lévi-Strauss' own words: "Mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation." *Ibid.*, p. 99.

14. M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (London, 1957), pp. 23-24.

Countless myths, according to Eliade, commemorate the Creation, the latter regarded by ancient man as something that “*really happened*, as an event that took place, in the plain sense of the term.”<sup>15</sup> Intimately related to this widespread idea that Creation was something actually experienced and witnessed is a corollary belief—that a great catastrophe brought down the curtain on the paradisaical conditions which formerly prevailed during a remembered Golden Age.<sup>16</sup>

If one is to judge by recent literature, Eliade’s definition of myth as sacred history has generally come to be accepted. Yet as insightful and compelling as his analysis of myth proves to be, there is a gaping hole in Eliade’s argument: no explanation is offered for the origin of the specific mythical themes uncovered—e.g., the Creation, Golden Age, epoch-ending catastrophe, the primeval *hieros gamos*, etc.

This deficiency is directly related to another major flaw plaguing most modern theories of ancient myth—namely, their general inability to explain the recurrence of mythical themes around the globe. Lévi-Strauss emphasized this problem in an influential essay many years ago: “How are we going to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar?”<sup>17</sup>

Particularly troubling are the countless mythical details that don’t make sense in the real world—flying or fire-breathing dragons; the dwarf-like hero who suddenly assumes a gigantic form spanning heaven; lightning emanating from the “eye” of the ancient sun-god; and countless others. One is naturally inclined to attribute these bizarre details to creative imagination and the art of storytelling, but this “explanation” runs up against an insuperable difficulty: these seemingly meaningless and “impossible” motifs are to be found around the globe. As Lévi-Strauss emphasized, it is highly unlikely that creative imagination could explain such endlessly recurring motifs:

“Mythic stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd, yet nevertheless they seem to reappear all over the world. A ‘fanciful’ creation of the mind in one place would be unique—you would not find the same creation in a completely different place.”<sup>18</sup>

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15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

17. C. Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structural Anthropology* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 208.

18. *Myth and Meaning* (New York, 1979), p. 11.

There would appear to be but three possible explanations for the presence of such recurring motifs: (1) They originated in creative imagination and subsequently became diffused around the globe; (2) They are natural products of the human mind; and (3) They have some reference to celestial phenomena, observed by ancient man the world over.

Lévi-Strauss has rightly rejected the possibility that creative imagination can ever account for the striking content and commonality characteristic of ancient myth. Diffusion from a single Ur-source (Africa?) can hardly be imagined nowadays, in light of what we know about the antiquity and complexity of human migration. Nor is there any evidence that a single Ur-culture once existed which could have produced a Homer from whom all peoples derived their favorite tales.

Lévi-Strauss and Jung are perhaps the best known proponents of the view that myth is a natural product of the human mind. The former, as we have seen, would understand myth as reflecting the brain's innate tendency to organize reality in terms of binary operations. Yet even if one grants that Lévi-Strauss has offered a valid theory of cognitive perception, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine how his theory will explain the specific recurring details of ancient myth. Why is Venus, rather than Mercury, interpreted as female? Why is Mars, rather than Jupiter, deemed the paramour of Venus and driller of fire? This list of questions could easily be multiplied a thousand-fold.

Carl Jung's theory that myth represents a projection of the contents of the Collective Unconscious suffers at once from a vagueness of expression as well as from its mystical nature. For as Jung himself admits, the objective referents of the Collective Unconscious can never be known:

"The methodological principle in accordance with which psychology treats the products of the unconscious is as follows: Contents of an archetypal character are manifestations of processes in the collective unconscious. Hence they do not refer to anything that is or has been conscious, but to something essentially unconscious. In the last analysis, therefore, it is impossible to say what they refer to."<sup>19</sup>

It will be seen that Jung's theory only removes the mystery of mythical imagery one step further back and thus is of little use in understanding its historical origins.<sup>20</sup>

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19. "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in C. Jung & C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (Princeton, 1969), p. 75.

The third theory—that ancient myth reflects mankind’s enduring fascination with heavenly phenomena—has much to recommend it. That ancient man observed and worshipped the celestial bodies very early on is well-documented. The astral theory of myth has the additional advantage that it readily and logically explains the apparent universality of various motifs as the product of common experience.

That ancient myth encodes important information about celestial goings on has long been noticed. Writing in the last century, Max Müller argued that myth was primarily concerned with recording early man’s perception of the most prominent celestial bodies. Müller’s so-called “solar” theory had a profound influence on scholarship at the turn of the century, and although it eventually fell out of favor, few scholars today would deny that myth occasionally has reference to celestial phenomena. Even Lévi-Strauss acknowledged the astronomical content of ancient myth: “Max Müller and his school must be given great credit for having discovered, and to some extent deciphered, the astronomical code so often used by the myths.”<sup>21</sup>

That said, most scholars agree that Müller went too far in tracing so much in ancient myth to the behavior of the sun. It is our opinion, however, that Müller was on the right track. As we have documented in previous chapters, ancient man was obsessed with the most prominent celestial bodies and that obsession informed myth at every turn.

The now all-but-forgotten “Pan-Babylonian” school of myth also emphasized the astral content of ancient myth and religion. Briefly stated, this school associated with the names Hugo Winckler and Alfred Jeremias held that ancient Babylonian ideas of cosmogony were based primarily upon a sophisticated knowledge of astronomy. Already well-developed in Mesopotamia by 4000 BCE, Babylonian astronomy subsequently became diffused around the globe, thereby accounting for the striking resemblances between the myths and astral traditions of different cultures.<sup>22</sup>

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20. See here the discussion of A. Dundes, “Madness in Method, Plus a Plea for Projective Inversion in Myth,” in L. Patton & W. Doniger eds., *Myth and Method* (London, 1996), pp. 147-157.

21. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man* (New York, 1971), p. 44.

22. M. Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonian and Assyria* (New York, 1911), p. 413, summarized this school as follows: “By ‘astral-mythology,’ the school means that all myths involve the personification of the heavenly bodies—chiefly sun, moon, and Venus—and that the explanation of all myths is to be sought in the phenomena of the heavens.”

Jonathan Smith, in an important survey of previous grand theories of myth, observed that the "Pan-Babylonian" school was virtually alone in providing a logically consistent explanation of the patterns to be found in ancient myth.<sup>23</sup> Subsequent schools of myth, according to Smith, have failed either because they ignore such patterns or because they fail to relate said patterns to a viable historical process. Smith's conclusion is so important it will be quoted in full:

"Of course, the Pan-Babylonian school was wrong. At the factual level, its exponents placed too great a reliance on the high antiquity of Near Eastern astrological texts, dating them almost two thousand years too early. On the theoretical level, they placed too great a reliance on diffusion. Yet, in many ways they were right. They saw clearly the need to ground comparison and patterns in a historical process, saw clearly the need to develop a complex model of tradition and the mechanisms for its transmission, saw clearly the need to balance generalities and particularities in a structure which integrated both, saw clearly the priority of comparative systematics over the continued cataloging of isolated comparative exempla, saw clearly the power of pattern (and hence, of comparison) as a device for interpretation. They bequeathed to us this rich heritage of possibilities—and they bequeathed to us the problems as well. The two chief options followed by students of religion since then have been either to continue its diffusionist program shorn of its systematic and theoretical depth (e.g., the Myth-Ritual school) or to cut loose the pattern and systematics from history (e.g., Eliade). We have yet to develop the responsible alternative: the integration of a complex notion of pattern and system with an equally complex notion of history."<sup>24</sup>

The Saturn theory, as we have seen, attempts to overcome these difficulties and achieve a new synthesis—a natural history of myth, if you will—by tracing the mythical patterns found around the globe to the shared experience of planetary catastrophe. Diffusion will still play an important role in the dissemination of sacred traditions, but the primary source of universal mythical patterns will be common experience of historical events.

In recent years signs abound that scholars are once again looking to the skies in order to unravel the content of ancient myth. Linda Schele, arguably the most important Mayanist working in the field today, wrote as follows of the intimate link between Maya religion and astronomy:

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23. J. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *Imagining Religion* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 26-29.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

"It seems that the interaction of astronomy and mythology was common in other cultures as well [as it was among the Maya]. Scholars working in South America have found similar kinds of systems in the Amazon...The Maya may have been using a way of thinking about the sky and using it in their mythology that was very ancient indeed. I'm even prepared to accept that much of the cosmology/mythology came straight across the Bering Strait, and that it may be 10,000 or 15,000 years old; it may be 20,000 years old. I think it may be possible that we have tapped into a very ancient stratum of human thought. If it did come across with the first Americans, then we may be in touch with one of the two or three great human intellectual traditions that we as a species have ever evolved, part of the fundamental 'software' that all of the peoples of the Americas and Asia have utilized."<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the most impassioned and ambitious defense of the view that astronomical conceptions pervade ancient myth is *Hamlet's Mill*, co-authored by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend. The authors summarize their position as follows:

"The real actors on the stage of the universe are very few, if their adventures are many. The most 'ancient treasure'—in Aristotle's word—that was left to us by our predecessors of the High and Far-Off Times was the idea that the gods are really stars, and that there are no others. The forces reside in the starry heavens, and all the stories, characters and adventures narrated by mythology concentrate on the active powers among the stars, who are the planets."<sup>26</sup>

As de Santillana and von Dechend document in great detail, the behavior of the planets is endlessly chronicled in ancient myth. Yet the authors of *Hamlet's Mill* fell victim to the same fallacy which undermined the Pan-Babylonian school—namely, an uncritical belief in the antiquity of sophisticated astronomical knowledge. Amazingly, de Santillana and von Dechend argue that such advanced concepts as the precession of the equinoxes were common knowledge already during the Paleolithic Period! First discovered in the ancient Near East, this astronomical knowledge supposedly became diffused around the globe, whereby it somehow became encoded in ancient myth but was otherwise forgotten.

In addition to making diffusion a cornerstone of their theory, de Santillana and von Dechend were staunch uniformitarians, going so far as to state—with specific reference to the myth of Phaethon's fiery fall—that the ancient mythmakers were not

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25. Quoted in R. Wertime & A. Schuster, "Written in the Stars: Celestial Origin of Maya Creation Myth," *Archaeology* (July/August, 1993), p. 32.

26. G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1969), p. 177.



"even mildly interested in unusual sensational 'catastrophes' caused by meteors, and the like."<sup>27</sup> Yet it would be difficult to point to a single recurring theme in all of ancient myth that does not have direct reference to "sensational catastrophes" associated with the tumultuous behavior and terrifying appearance of the various planets. Certainly the myth of Phaethon, with its description of the hero's thunderbolt-induced fall from heaven and resulting worldwide conflagration, is no exception to this general statement. That striking parallels to the Greek myth of Phaethon will be found around the globe, often preserving the same catastrophic elements as the Greek account, only further supports the argument defended here.<sup>28</sup> On this score, Velikovsky proved more insightful than the authors of *Hamlet's Mill*, citing with approval the opinion of Plato:

"That story [of Phaethon], as it is told, has the fashion of a legend, but the truth of it lies in the occurrence of a shifting of the bodies in the heavens which move about the earth, and a destruction of things on the earth by a fierce fire."<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, it is our opinion that previous theories of myth have failed precisely because they overlooked (or ignored) the prominent role of planet-induced catastrophes. It is the catastrophic context of ancient myth, coupled with the fact that the extraordinary events in question were projected large and loud in the skies overhead, which alone explains the undeniable fact that myths around the globe share certain motifs in common, many of which—like fire-breathing dragons or polar suns—are of a thoroughly anomalous nature. Previous theories of myth have always stumbled when it came to explaining these anomalous elements, much as they stumbled when it came to explaining the origin of the primary mythological themes characterizing sacred lore everywhere: the *hieros gamos*, Creation, the war-ring goddess, the ascent to heaven, the dragon combat, etc. Yet if the prototypical events commemorated in myths of the *hieros gamos* and the ascent to heaven were rooted in observation and experience, their universal nature is easily and logically accounted for. The "sacred history" recounted in ancient myth was considered real and true—in the Eliadean sense—precisely because it was thoroughly grounded in objective historical events experienced by ancient man the world over, the latter constituting the elusive "archetypes" of myth.

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27. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

28. For parallels from the New World, see the discussion in J. Frazer, *Apollodorus: The Library*, Vol. II (London, 1963), pp. 388-394.

29. *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1950), p. 156.

In previous chapters it has been documented that various planets were described in terms impossible to reconcile with modern astronomical theory. Venus was described as possessing comet-like attributes and as having once fallen from heaven amidst cataclysmic circumstances. The same planet was described as standing in the "heart of heaven" together with the "sun" and "moon." The ancient sun-god was said to "rise" and "set" upon the same celestial mountain. Mars was described as climbing a ladder to heaven or as standing within the "mountain" of the sun. Dozens of other equally "impossible" scenarios have been cited.

The theory advocated here—that the ancient myths describe a series of spectacular cataclysms involving the various planets—has the additional advantage that it is complemented at every point by ancient art. Thus it is that ancient traditions of "lost" suns are complemented by prehistoric pictographs depicting a wheel-like "sun" bearing little resemblance to the current sun. Ancient traditions of Inanna/Venus standing in the "heart" of heaven together with Shamash and Sin are complemented by pictures showing Venus as an eight-pointed star set upon the disc of Shamash while enclosed within the crescent of Sin—this in striking contradiction to current astronomical reality. Even the ancient traditions describing an ascent to heaven along a luminous extraterrestrial ladder are complemented by prehistoric pictures of "suns" with ladder-like appendages. Other equally glaring anomalies in the artwork surrounding the various celestial bodies will be documented in volumes to follow. The truth is that the pictorial evidence commemorating a catastrophic solar system is so abundant and compelling that it is impossible to do it justice in a single volume.

As we enter the 21st century, students of ancient myth stand on the threshold of truly revolutionary discoveries and possibilities. For the first time in recorded history, we are in a position to reconstruct the recent history of the solar system at a level of detail impossible to achieve with the physical sciences alone. Why should we continue to rely on computer simulations to reconstruct the history of the solar system when we possess eyewitness testimony corroborated at a level of detail worthy of the modern courtroom? That said, a scientific approach to ancient myth will not confine itself to myth alone, for there is every reason to believe that future developments in the physical sciences will continue to reveal the glaring deficiencies attending the currently prevailing belief in the recent peaceful history of the solar system, just as there is every reason to believe that such developments will help us better understand the nature and chronology of the extraordinary events described in this volume. For the first time ever, we are in a position to offer a Natural History of myth. Should we make sufficient progress in that endeavor, the prospect increases that we will at last be in a position to offer a Natural History of the human mind and its most treasured products and institutions.



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In the present volume, the first in a multi-volume series, we have outlined some of the more compelling mythological themes involving the planet Venus. We have documented that Venus was envisaged as a beautiful woman, as an agent of war and disaster, as a luminous "flower," as a serpent, as a "star of lamentation," as an eclipse-monster, and as the longed-for celestial motherland sought by deceased kings and transmigrating souls. Not one of these traditions finds a satisfactory explanation by reference to Venus' current behavior and appearance. This fact alone is of much interest and raises a number of intriguing questions. Why would the ancients have described the most prominent planet in such fashion? And why is it that Venus' current idiosyncratic behavior—including its restricted movements about the sun and periodic disappearances—rarely forms a subject of ancient myth?

In a brief overview of Inanna's cult, we documented that the planet-goddess was described as a dragon raining fire from heaven; as a bloodthirsty warrior; and as a terrifying agent of storm, "earthquake," and disaster. If these characteristics serve to define the Sumerian goddess in her "terrible aspect," other traditions celebrate the goddess' positive attributes. Thus, Inanna was intimately associated with a sacred marriage ritual believed to ensure fertility throughout the land. The Sumerian testimony regarding the appearance and behavior of Inanna/Venus is of fundamental importance in reconstructing ancient conceptions of the planet, not only because of its extreme antiquity but because it has striking parallels around the globe.

Shifting our focus from ancient Mesopotamia to the New World, we documented that the Skidi Pawnee from some three thousand years later preserved remarkably similar beliefs about Venus. Thus, a central tenet of Skidi lore held that Venus was associated with a sacred marriage believed to ensure fertility throughout the land. The prototypical "marriage" of Venus and Mars, moreover, was explicitly related to the sacred events recalled as Creation. This remarkable correspondence in belief between two such disparate cultures—hitherto unnoticed—supports our contention that ancient myths surrounding the two planets had an observational basis and traced to singular historical events. It also supports the view, defended here, that the fundamental features of Inanna's mythology reflect and commemorate the pre-historic behavior of the planet Venus.

A global survey of Venus-lore has revealed that catastrophic imagery distinguishes the planet's mythical career at every turn. Whether it is the image of Inanna/Venus moving as a serpent-dragon while raining fire from the sky, or Hathor's rampage as the raging "Eye" of Re, the destructive behavior ascribed to the planet is everywhere apparent. Particularly telling are those traditions describing Venus as having once fallen from heaven. Notable here are the Sumerian traditions recounting the fall of Inanna/Lamashtu; the Phoenician rite commemorating Astarte's fiery fall; and the Shipibo account from South America wherein Venus is described as falling from heaven like a meteor amidst great noise.

Equally compelling and catastrophically inspired are those myths that describe the great goddess as suffering a dramatic metamorphosis in form whereupon she appears as a witch-like hag with wildly disheveled hair. Prominent examples of this widespread motif include Inanna/Lamashtu, Kali, 'al-Uzza, and Holda. As the examples provided by Inanna/Lamashtu and 'al-Uzza confirm, there is an indissoluble relation between the disheveled goddess and the planet Venus. It is not by accident that the Inca described Venus as the planet with disheveled hair. And it is not by accident that the ancient Babylonian skywatchers compared the planet Venus to a "witch-star," an appellation that will never be explained by reference to that planet's current appearance.

It has been documented that the ancient terminology and mythology surrounding Venus and comets overlaps to such an extent as to be virtually indistinguishable. As the planet-goddess with long and horribly disheveled hair, Venus represents the prototypical "comet" of ancient folklore. It was Venus' hair that blotted out the light of the sun and cast the world into a "long night." The ominous and universally consistent mythology attached to comets (and eclipses) originated in spectacular cataclysmic events involving the planet Venus (and Mars). Future studies will confirm this finding beyond any reasonable doubt.

In concluding, we would revisit Jacobsen's definition of religion as a confrontation with the "Numinous":

"Basic to all religion...is, we believe, a unique experience of confrontation with power not of this world. Rudolph Otto called this confrontation 'Numinous' and analyzed it as the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*, a confrontation with a 'Wholly Other' outside of normal experience and indescribable in its terms; terrifying, ranging from sheer demonic dread through awe to sublime majesty; and fascinating, with irresistible attraction, demanding unconditional allegiance. It is the positive human response to this experience in thought (myth and theology) and action (cult and worship) that constitutes religion."

It was Jacobsen's opinion that Inanna represented the "numen of the date storehouse."<sup>1</sup> Certainly it is difficult to discern anything in the storehouse that would evoke feelings of terror and dread. Yet Sumerian descriptions of the planet Venus, as Inanna, repeatedly emphasize its terrifying appearance and disastrous behavior. Sumerian texts describe the Venus-torch as dispersing "terror" to the ends of the universe. The melammu sheen said to envelop Inanna/Venus—likened by ancient scribes to the terrifying glow associated with comets—is said to "provoke shivers of fright, panic, trembling, and terror." Inanna herself, in the guise of Lamashtu, formed one of the most terrifying and dreaded figures in all of ancient folklore and as such represents an early counterpart to such bogeywomen as Lilith, Kali, the Gorgon, and the witch. The awe-inspiring power of the planet and the unconditional allegiance it inspired are aptly illustrated, finally, by the fact that ancient cultures around the globe offered it human sacrifices in a misguided attempt at propitiation and to ward off further disaster.

An encounter with the "Numinous," according to Jacobsen, could never be adequately described: "Since the Numinous is not of this world it cannot in any real sense be 'described'; for all available descriptive terms are grounded in worldly experience and so fall short." It is our opinion, in contrast, that mankind's confrontation with the Numinous, exquisitely illustrated by Sumerian descriptions of Inanna's epiphany, most definitely had to do with natural phenomena of this world—specifically, a horrifying confrontation with a spectacularly luminous Venus. We would also argue that language is a perfectly suitable medium for accurately describing an encounter with Numinous phenomena. That such is, in fact, the case is rendered probable by the fact that Sumerian descriptions of Inanna/Venus find striking parallels in Egypt, Mesoamerica, and elsewhere, thereby confirming the veracity and accuracy of the Sumerian testimony. The fact that the

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1. *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), p. 135.

ancient language describing Venus is closely paralleled by ancient art depicting that planet only further bolsters our confidence that the ancients were accurately portraying their beloved planet-goddess.

## Abbreviations

ARBAE: Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology

BSOAS: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies.

CT: Egyptian Coffin Texts

JCS: Journal of Cuneiform Studies

JHA: Journal for the History of Astronomy

JNES: Journal of Near Eastern Studies

LÄ: Lexikon der Ägyptologie (Berlin), ed. by W. Helck.

PT: Egyptian Pyramid Texts

RA: Reallexikon der Assyriologie (Berlin, 1928-), ed. by E. Ebeling & B. Meissner.

RE: Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (Stuttgart, 1894-1980), ed. by W. Pauly.

RML: Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie (Leipzig, 1884-1937), ed. by W. H. Röscher.

ZA: Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie

ZÄS: Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde

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